

Racial Justice at the Core

Profiles of the New Jersey and Virginia campaigns
to abolish youth prisons through a racial justice lens



NO KIDS IN PRISON

Introduction

The Past Isn't Dead. It Isn't Even Past."

William Faulkner

We know that the formal end of slavery in 1865 did not end racism and inequality in America. As Jim Crow carried on the legacies of slavery, rates of incarceration for black Americans steadily climbed. Many youth prisons opened in the years and decades following slavery, including The New Jersey Training School for boys, which opened its doors in 1867. Virginia's Beaumont Juvenile Corrections Center opened in 1890 and its Bon Air Juvenile Corrections Center opened in 1910. We see the relics of slavery in the hyper-governed communities of color across the country. From "million dollar blocks" to inequitable school districts, communities of color have struggled to receive the positive responses and opportunities from the public and private sectors that affluent white communities have received. The vestiges of racism and slavery mean that youth justice will always be a racial justice issue.

Each year, the United States incarcerates nearly 45,000 youth. The youth justice system incarcerates African-American youth at a rate 5 times higher than the rate for white youth, despite research that African American youth and white youth commit offenses at similar rates. Likewise, Native American youth are 3.2 times more likely to be incarcerated than white youth, and Latino youth are 2 times more likely to be incarcerated than white youth. New Jersey and Virginia have higher than average rates of disparity: Youth of color in New Jersey are over 30 times more likely to be incarcerated. Youth of color in Virginia are nearly six times more likely to be incarcerated than their white counterparts.

With these staggering data points, the Virginia "RISE" campaign and the New Jersey "150 Years is Enough" campaign have placed racial inequality at the center of their efforts to end youth incarceration.



Blueprints for the NJ Training School for Boys | Archival Image of Youth Prisoners

Racial Justice at the Core

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.



Virginia

RISE for Youth describes itself as,

a nonpartisan campaign committed to dismantling the youth prison model by promoting the creation of community-based alternatives to youth incarceration. [Their] work centers the voices of impacted youth and communities and challenges racial injustice in Virginia.

It was important for RISE to define itself through a racial justice lens in its mission statement to ensure that partners, champions, and allies knew where they stood from the beginning.

When RISE for Youth first formed in 2015, organizational constraints prevented RISE from fulfilling its mission to challenge racial injustice. In its early years, the campaign was housed within a local legal services agency. RISE’s parent organization’s leadership expressed concerns of a backlash from government agencies when RISE sought to highlight racial inequities as a part of its advocacy platform. Frequently, the coalition leadership wanted to quickly resolve conflict from the gubernatorial administration or legislators without ever talking to the communities from which the youth came. However, as RISE describes it, “racial justice is the most important lens and the moment we step away from that framing, we ignore the fundamental reasons why youth prisons exist.” In 2018, RISE spun off from its parent organization to become a separate independent organization that could fully embrace the messaging of racial injustice in Virginia’s juvenile justice system.

Don't stop doing what's right even when folks shy away from the promotion of racial justice. Let those organizations go that aren't bought into every child deserving humanized treatment."

Valerie Slater, Executive Director RISE for Youth

Satellite Photo of Beaumont Juvenile Correctional Facility



New Jersey

Similarly, the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice—the entity running the campaign to end youth incarceration in the state—puts impacted communities of color at the front of all its work. From economic equality to civic engagement, the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice explicitly frames each issue as a racial justice issue.

New Jersey currently has the worst racial disparities in the nation among its incarcerated black and white youth. The 150 Years is Enough Campaign addresses this reality head on by making ending racial and ethnic disparities its number one priority in all facets of its work. As stated in the Institute’s report, “Investing in Kids, Not Prisons: The Urgency of Transformative Youth Justice Reform in New Jersey”, “[t]o be clear, these racial disparities in our state’s youth prisons reflect racially discriminatory decisions about which kids deserve incarceration, and which deserve rehabilitation and second chances.” This is but one example of how all advocacy by the campaign is conducted through a racial justice lens.

New Jersey Institute for Social Justice

The New Jersey Institute for Social Justice's mission is to empower urban residents to realize and achieve their full potential. Established in 1999 by Alan V. and Amy Lowenstein, the Institute's dynamic and independent advocacy is aimed at toppling load-bearing walls of structural inequality to create just, vibrant, and healthy urban communities. We employ a broad range of advocacy tools to advance our ambitious urban agenda, including research, analysis and writing, public education, grassroots organizing, the development of pilot programs, legislative strategies, and litigation. Using a holistic approach to address the unique and critical issues facing New Jersey’s urban communities, the Institute advocates for systemic reform that is at once transformative, achievable in the state, and replicable in communities across the nation.



Photo: NJISJ

Moments for Action

When we identify where our privilege intersects with somebody else's oppression, we'll find our opportunities to make real change."

Ijeoma Oluo, So You Want to Talk About Race

When Democrat Phil Murphy won New Jersey's gubernatorial election, he did so with 94% of the African-American vote. As he began governing, it was clear to the New Jersey Institute of Social Justice that he was not meeting the needs of the African-American communities that got him elected. Thus, "recognizing the urgency of this moment, the Institute, the 150 Years is Enough Campaign, and the United Black Agenda Group launched The Movement for the 94 Percent Campaign to hold Governor Phil Murphy accountable to the issues—including youth justice—important to the 94 percent of Black voters who voted for him." In direct response to this movement, and on the eve of the campaign's rally, the governor announced the creation of the "Task Force for the Continued Transformation of Youth Justice." This coalition continues to push the governor and state legislature to address issues affecting black communities with youth justice being at the top of the list. By partnering with the United Black Agenda Group, the campaign expanded its advocacy table by including more issues that affect impacted communities and created a fuller vision for what is needed for black and brown communities to thrive.



150 YEARS IS ENOUGH.

94% Platform

Transforming the Youth Justice System: New Jersey has a shameful system of youth incarceration, in which a Black child is 30 times more likely to be incarcerated than a white child- the highest disparity in the nation.

Restoring the Right to Vote to People with Criminal Convictions: New Jersey denies the vote to nearly 100,000 people who are in prison, on parole, or on probation. Half of those denied the right to vote are Black, though Black people comprise just 15 percent of the state's population.

Governor Murphy should commit to signing and using the power of his office to urge the passage of S-2100/A-3456, historic legislation that will restore the precious right to vote to people in prison, on parole, or on probation.

Closing the Racial Wealth Gap: In New Jersey, one of the wealthiest states in America, the median net worth for New Jersey's white families is \$309,396 -- the highest in the nation. But the median net worth for New Jersey's Latino and Black families is just \$7,020 and \$5,900, respectively.

To determine the needs of impacted communities, the 150 Years is Enough Campaign engaged in community asset mapping by partnering with a university to conduct an evaluation of resources available in the communities overly represented in the juvenile justice system. In addition to this academic survey, the campaign hired data collectors from impacted communities to canvass those communities and connect with grassroots organizations that weren't easily discovered through the university's online research. During these conversations with community groups, the data collectors were able to learn about preventive programs and services and discover that even though available, services were not delivered in a timely manner to truly support families and youth. With this quantitative and qualitative data now available to the campaign, its efforts can be more targeted when talking about alternatives to incarceration for youth in New Jersey.

In Virginia, when Democratic Governor Ralph Northam's medical school yearbook showed him in blackface with a classmate dressed as a Ku Klux Klan member, RISE immediately came out with a video asking that the governor meet with their coalition to discuss the incident in relation to current racial inequities in Virginia. Shortly after this debacle, Governor Northam's wife had an incident in which she asked black middle schoolers to hold cotton and imagine what being enslaved felt like while on a tour of a historic mansion in Virginia. Again, RISE immediately came out with a video not asking for an apology, but rather, a dialogue on how Jim Crow juvenile justice is ever present.

The Governor did not respond to RISE's request. Unwilling to back down, RISE persisted and connected with other black leaders to create the The Virginia Black Leadership Roundtable, which then enabled them to meet with the Governor. Similar to the work in New Jersey, this diverse coalition of black leaders--from academia to small business owners— created talking points around pressing issues facing black communities, including lifting up youth justice as a racial justice issue in Virginia.

As this coalition of black leaders gains momentum, it hopes to develop a unified set of principles and continue making the connections from youth justice to economic justice and educational equality in order to influence the legislative process.

Unfortunately, the Governor left the meeting with The Virginia Black Leadership Roundtable while juvenile justice was under discussion and later actually praised the work of the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice. The governor's response did not deter RISE from continuing to engage in tough racial justice conversations within communities and with legislators. RISE developed a candidates' survey for its upcoming state elections that asked the question: "Will America be america for black children?" Surprisingly, challengers responded from areas where RISE is not the most active, which has allowed RISE to begin building some additional political support with new allies. This has also allowed RISE to move forward with legislation to put resources in impacted communities for black and brown youth.

Representation Matters

American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen.”

Toni Morrison

The fact that both RISE and the 150 Years is Enough campaigns are run predominantly by people of color is also an incredibly important attribute of their work. The advocacy becomes personal when people of color are able to imagine the dismantling of systems that the white-dominated power structure created to oppress people of color— and start to imagine alternatives for youth from communities of color. This work of envisioning a world without prisons and with community resources cannot be done without lifting up, and supporting, the leadership of youth of color who are impacted by the system. The New Jersey and Virginia campaigns have expanded representation at decision making tables by creating spaces for youth leaders to advocate their vision of a world without youth prisons.

I believe people of color —committed to radically transforming our punitive youth incarceration system— must lead in building a new restorative justice model for our kids most impacted by the system.”

Retha Onitiri, *Director of Community Engagement at NJISJ*



150 Years Is Enough Campaign & Youth 4 Justice NJ

The heart of the Institute's 150 Years is Enough campaign is building robust support for transformation from the ground up in communities most impacted by New Jersey's youth justice system through community-engagement strategies, restorative and transformative justice practices, policies and practices, and reinvestment in community-based programming. To engage youth in the campaign, the 150 Years is Enough Campaign sponsors an eight-week youth leadership training program and teach organizing and advocacy skills to youth 13-to-24 years old. The Campaign successfully completed training cohorts in Newark (May 2017), New Brunswick (November 2017), Camden (May 2018), and Newark (November 2018).

Beyond the training program to sustain youth participation, the Campaign created youth councils formally known as Youth 4 Justice NJ. Youth 4 Justice NJ launched the first youth council on May 17, 2018, in Newark. Through bi-weekly meetings, youth learn personal development and advocacy skills needed to support the campaign and bring about real change in their communities. The councils occasionally discuss state and local issues (e.g. Newark Curfew, Stationhouse Adjustment, etc.) that affect youth and outline possible ways to resolve these issues. Council members have engaged in the campaign in multiple ways by: 1) participating in the Youth First Leadership Network; 2) working in the Institute's Internship program; 3) participating in panel discussions at conferences; 4) supporting community rallies; and 5) presenting at legislative hearings. Youth interested in the 150 Years Is Enough campaign can join youth councils in Newark, Trenton, and Camden.

Instead of spending millions to lock us up, we are calling for our cities to invest in solutions that are based in common sense — our education, our economic well-being and community-based opportunities that are proven to be more effective and help us thrive.”

Reid Stowe, Youth Leader for RISE for Youth



Youth for RISE Advocacy Network

The Youth for RISE Advocacy Network is for youth and young adults ages 13-24 who have personally experienced the juvenile justice system or who are interested in improving the juvenile justice system and dismantling the school to prison pipeline. Through the Youth for RISE Advocacy Network (YRAN), RISE for Youth does the critical work of building youth leaders through a robust training program with concrete and direct pathways to leadership and employment for our youth. YRAN youth are trained and equipped to take the strategic offense in addressing issues surrounding juvenile justice. With an army of passionate, focused, educated and righteously angry youth advocates RISE is taking our advocacy to the next level!

The YRAN program provides young advocates with six months of formalized advocacy training followed by six month internships for youth who complete the training curriculum and are interested in advocacy as a career choice. Internship opportunities are within partner organizations also committed to racial, social and juvenile justice with the intent to lead to entry level full time employment opportunities. YRAN creates a unique opportunity for our young people to be immersed in an intense learning environment that encompasses both their lived experiences, the advocacy work some are already doing within the RISE program and exploring employment opportunities within RISE and connected partner organizations.



Working with White Allies

If you tremble with indignation at every injustice then you are a comrade of mine.”

Ernesto Che Guevara

While campaigns seek to lift up the leadership of people of color, white allies are still needed and valued. However, too often groups who don't prioritize youth justice as a racial justice issue determine what youth justice reform looks like -- thus solutions don't go far enough to actually strengthen communities of color. To be successful in dismantling the youth prison model, allies must embrace the interconnectedness of race and incarceration in America. While closing youth prisons is one goal, strengthening communities of color by developing supports for Brown and Black youth is the ultimate win in this work. Achieving racial justice means going further than having youth of color as tokens and spokespeople sharing their stories about how the system has failed them. Youth of color must be the leaders in the movement for transforming youth justice and investing in communities of color so that all youth have the opportunity to thrive. Allies can play a fundamental role in developing the leadership of youth of color and recognizing opportunities for advocacy, but allies must be willing to step back and let impacted youth and communities decide what works for them. The overarching message from RISE and 150 Years is Enough campaigns is: let impacted communities and people lead and make sure there are people of color at every decision-making table where impacted communities of color are discussed.



Photo: Amanda Maglione

Conclusion

The following recommendations highlight what advocates believe are some of the most important elements of a successful campaign to frame youth justice as a racial justice issue:

1. Ensure that campaigns are housed in organizations that prioritize racial justice as a youth justice issue.
2. Prioritize the need to eliminate racial disparities in all messaging and communications.
3. Leverage relationships with organizations focused on uplifting communities of color to create larger platforms aimed at improving the lives of people of color.
4. Identify opportunities where government has failed to address the needs of communities of color and connect those moments to youth justice.
5. Invest time and effort in developing leadership of impacted youth, and support them at every stage of the campaign.
6. Work with allies who are willing to step back, support, and let impacted youth and communities lead.

Acknowledgments

Carmen Daugherty primarily authored this document through information gained from interviews with the RISE for Youth executive director and the 150 Years is Enough Campaign director, Valerie Slater and Retha Onitiri.



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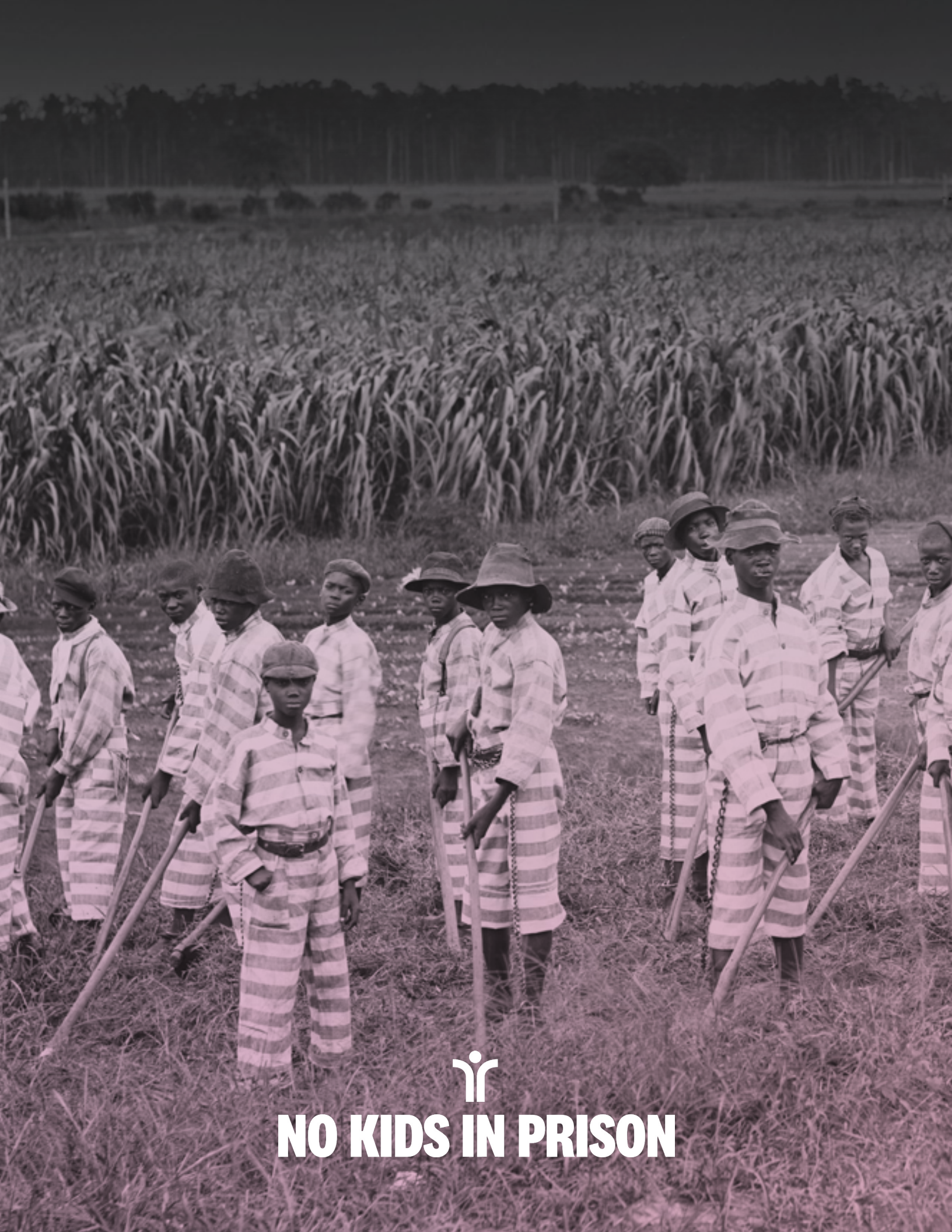
The Youth First Initiative is a national campaign to end youth incarceration and invest in community-based supports, services and opportunities for youth. Youth First seeks to achieve a tipping point in ending youth incarceration and shifting resources towards investments in youth in their communities. The initiative is fiscally sponsored by the New Venture Fund, a 501 c 3 charity. | nokidsinprison.org



RISE for Youth is a nonpartisan campaign committed to dismantling the youth prison model by promoting the creation of community-based alternatives to youth incarceration. Our work centers the voices of impacted youth and communities and challenges racial injustice in Virginia. | riseforyouth.org

150 YEARS IS ENOUGH.

The 150 Years is Enough Campaign, a project under the New Jersey Institute of Social Justice, aims to transform New Jersey's youth incarceration system into a community-based system of care by closing two youth prisons—the New Jersey Training School for Boys (Jamesburg) and the Female Secure Care and Intake Facility (Hayes)—and investing in community-based programs. | njisj.org/150_years_is_enough



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