

Juvenile Injustice

by Tanisia Morris and Jonathan Mandell
Thursday, January 25, 2007 12:00 AM

In his [2007 State of the City address](#), Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced that he will launch “the most significant restructuring of our juvenile justice system in decades,” including an increase in alternatives to incarceration, a crackdown on truancy, and a call to remove youthful offender status for those young people convicted of a crime involving a gun. “We’re going to do more than ever to hold accountable the children and teens who run afoul of the law,” the mayor said, “and also help them get the services they need.”

One express subway stop up from City Hall, in a brownstone near Union Square with impressive doors and a well-kept stoop, Asadullah Muhammad has a mixed reaction.

“I’m glad there will be more services,” says Muhammad. “But his speech talks about holding young people accountable; it doesn’t talk about holding public officials accountable. Yes, young people need more services. They also need more opportunities.”

Muhammad runs [Each One Teach One](#), or EOTO, a 15-week youth leadership program that trains and educates New York City teens who have been incarcerated, or are interested in reforming juvenile justice. The program is part of the [Juvenile Justice Project](#), run by the Correctional Association of New York, a non-profit organization (housed in that Union Square brownstone) working for a more fair and humane criminal justice system.

It is a sad fact that young people who go to jail often boast about it afterwards. EOTO teaches youth to share their incarceration experiences as a teaching tool rather than a bragging right.

Listening to youth who have been incarcerated is becoming increasingly critical here in New York City, which since last year has had a more than 13 percent increase in the number of juveniles admitted to secure facilities maintained by the city's Department of Juvenile Justice. And it can bring about real change. “It’s very powerful when you have youth who have navigated the juvenile justice system tell legislators and the City Council what’s really going on behind the walls,” said Muhammad.

Twice a week for 15 weeks, the 15 teens of EOTO are paid to learn about the injustices within the system, like the brutality that happens inside youth prisons. Once a year, they travel

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to Albany to speak to legislators face to face about specific bills and changes they want made. Some of what they have advocated coincides with what the mayor talked about in his speech:

Alternatives To Incarceration

The members of Each One Teach One have often puzzled over why only five of the 31 Office of Children and Family Services facilities are actually located in the city, when most of the kids confined in them are from the city. They were happy, Muhammad says, to hear the mayor's commitment to "provide judges more options" for keeping youthful offenders "in the community â€" but out of trouble", including "a \$9 million initiative to reduce the number of kids sent away to Upstate facilities", and a promise to provide more family-based and mental health services.

The young people of EOTO have actively lobbied to provide more money for ["alternative to incarceration"](#) programs. Research has found that these programs, like community service, cost less than detention and are more effective at reducing crime. New York State currently spends \$150 million a year to lock up youth. But nearly half of these teens end up being rearrested and locked up again within a year, according to the 2006 Mayor's Management Report. "There's nothing for them to do when they get out, so they go back to what they're used to," said Rodney, 18, an EOTO team member (whose last name is being withheld because of his previous experience with the system).

Rodney was lucky. After being caught with a gun, he was sentenced to six months at [CASES](#) (Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services), an alternative to incarceration program that provides juvenile delinquents with education, counseling, internships and job training under strict supervision. Because he missed 10 days of work at CASES, he was sent to jail at Riker's Island for a week. It was an experience, he says, that led him to promise himself never ever to go back there again.

Now, after going through CASES and finishing EOTO's 15-week program, he knows it is up to him to stay on track. Rodney plans to go to college for business management, and is waiting to hear back from several City University schools. "It takes self-control to be around the same surroundings you were in before you were arrested but keep yourself from being a part of it," he said, speaking, of course, from experience. "Even now, certain things happen and I feel myself getting ready to slip and I have to catch myself."

Youth Offender Status

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The mayor also said he would ask Albany to “eliminate youthful offender status for any violent felony committed with a firearm.” “We have to face facts,” the mayor explained. “More than 50 percent of all gun arrests involve young offenders. We have got to stop treating illegal gun possession among minors as though it were a trivial, youthful indiscretion. It is not.”

Muhammad disagrees with this proposal. “Youthful offender status doesn’t mean that an offender gets off scott-free. It just means it’s not necessarily hanging over their heads for the rest of their lives; they won’t have to put it on a job application decades later.” “Young people convicted of having a firearm don’t automatically get youthful offender status. It’s up to the discretion of judges. If you eliminate that discretion, then judges won’t have the opportunity or the motivation to pay attention to the specific needs, family situations and so on of individual young people.”

What Teens Need

The members of Each One Teach One explore how young people get stereotyped and misrepresented by the media, and how this has an impact on recommended policies. The teens themselves work to enact what they see as sensible policies. In one recent workshop, participants even learned how to write a press release and hold a press conference.

At last year’s Advocacy Day in Albany, EOTO teens asked the state legislators to provide more money for alternative to incarceration programs, and also to:

- Create an independent child advocate office in New York where jailed youth can call if they're being abused or need help. At the moment, the thousands of teens in detention in New York can only complain to one person who takes complaints for the whole state.
- Support a bill that would protect lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth in the juvenile justice system from physical and verbal abuse. (It has since been voted down.)
- Support a bill to help get safe housing for teens who had been forced into prostitution. (Muhammad hopes this bill will be reintroduced and passed this year.)

Antoinette, 17, said EOTO, coupled with the 19 months she spent at Tyron Girls' Center near Albany, helped her pick a career. “I used to bark at my lawyers,” she said, because they never seemed to defend her the way she wanted. And now? After learning to advocate on behalf of her incarcerated peers, “I want to be a lawyer to help people,” she said, smiling. “That’s my dream.”

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Tania Morris, 19, is a writer for New Youth Connections, a publication of our partner, [Youth Communication](#)

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