



BECAUSE THE CONSEQUENCES AREN'T MINOR

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

November 29, 2011

Contact:

Eric Solomon

(202) 558-3580 x20

(202) 253-5557 (cell)

esolomon@cfyj.org

**Former Youth Offender and Experts Testify to the Department of Justice's
National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence**

Washington, D.C. – The U.S. Department of Justice is holding national public hearings across the country as part of the Attorney General's National Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence. The task force is part of the Attorney General's Defending Childhood initiative, a project arising from the need to respond to the epidemic levels of exposure to violence faced by our nation's children. The hearings kick off in Baltimore, Maryland and witnesses include a former youth offender, advocates, and experts, as they testify on the abuse and violence that occur in juvenile and adult correctional facilities.

On any given night in America, 10,000 children are held in adult jails and prisons. Approximately 7,500 of these kids have never been convicted of a crime. This hearing comes as the Department of Justice considers final regulations to implement the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA).

"There are too many young people in our adult facilities that are subject to violence and sexual abuse," said Campaign for Youth Justice President and CEO Liz Ryan. "It is crucial that the Department of Justice adopt a complete ban on placing kids in adult jails and prisons."

Many children are placed in isolation which can produce harmful consequences, including death. Youth in adult facilities are frequently locked down 23 hours a day in small cells with no natural light. These conditions can cause anxiety, paranoia, and exacerbate existing mental disorders putting youth at risk of suicide. In fact, youth housed in adult jails are 36 times more likely to commit suicide than are youth housed in juvenile detention facilities.

"At such a young age, we shouldn't be exposed to the lack of counseling, staying behind bars for long periods of time, not talking to any one and only getting showers once a week." said Jabreria Handy, who is currently a Youth Advocate at Community Law in Action (CLIA). "It's just emotionally and psychologically hurtful and upsetting."

The vast majority of children who live behind bars in this country have committed non-violent offenses. As a country we spend millions of dollars annually imprisoning children for relatively minor offenses. But what is even more devastating is the violence, abuse and trauma that is so often inflicted upon our children once they enter the juvenile justice system.

"There's no dollar value we can place on the thousands of young lives that have been altered forever as a result of the abuse they experience inside juvenile prisons and jails," said Sheila Bedi, Deputy Legal Director of the Southern Poverty Law Center, in her testimony. "I urge the Task Force to recognize that violence inside this nation's juvenile prisons and jails and the violence affecting children who are imprisoned in adult correctional facility is a national crisis that resounds far beyond the prison walls into all of our communities."

Over the course of the year, the Task Force will learn from practitioners, policymakers, academics and community members about the extent and nature of the problem of children's exposure to violence in the United States, both as victims and as witnesses. The task force will also identify promising practices, programming and community strategies used to prevent and respond to children's exposure to violence.

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The Campaign for Youth Justice (CFYJ) is a national organization dedicated to ending the practice of trying, sentencing and incarcerating youth under the age of 18 in the adult criminal justice system.

For more background on this issue, please visit www.campaignforyouthjustice.org.