

CAMPAIGN FOR
YOUTH  JUSTICE

BECAUSE THE CONSEQUENCES AREN'T MINOR

GET ORGANIZED

A Monthly Column by Grace Bauer – October 2010

The Importance of Demand

Grace Bauer

Grace Bauer, a field organizer, joined the Campaign for Youth Justice in 2008. She has worked to unite the parents and allies of children to change laws and practices that result in children being prosecuted and confined as adults.

In 1857, Frederick Douglass said, "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

I have always loved this quote and often use it to inspire myself to stand up when most people would rather I remain sitting and quiet. Imagine you are a concerned citizen or family member sitting in a room of professionals and experts on youth justice and the bureaucracy of the system compels people along the same roads that have led this country to incarcerate more people than the top 35 European countries combined. You hear someone say that the problem they have is that kids behave terribly and parental involvement is non-existent. You have two choices, 1) you sit quietly and the status quo remains, 2) you speak up and say that isn't what you believe. If you choose the latter, at the very least you have brought forth a different opinion and possibly provoked a different thought process.

There is something else of great importance in this quote that I think few of us think about and that is the DEMAND. Without the demand we would still have folks of color sitting at the back of the bus or, worse yet, still in slavery on plantations, all of us would have 16 hour workdays or more with no days off and no worker's rights. People with disabilities would have not have rights to the accommodations they need to live and the list could fill books. People make a demand and when the demand is shared by enough people, and enough people become engaged in the struggle, change will come.

Logic and science are in our corner on the issue of treating children as adults in regards to the criminal justice system. There are plenty of people directly and indirectly affected by mass incarceration and foolish, ineffective and wasteful "get tough on crime" rhetoric. With 2.3 million behind bars and over 5 million on probation or parole, we certainly have enough people engaged. Yet, have we made the DEMAND?

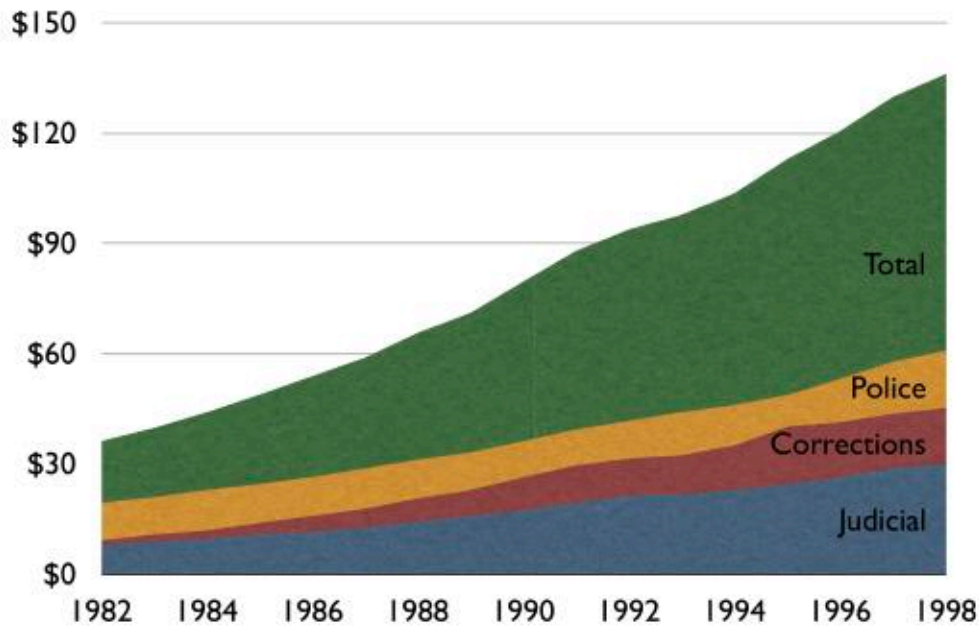
Logic, science, and huge numbers will never be enough until people begin to call out what isn't right, what isn't working and offering solutions instead. Of course, we should be trying

to make things better for children in facilities, regardless of what kinds of facilities but that alone is not enough. We must call for an end to this madness that destroys the lives of untold millions. How, you might ask?

If you read a newspaper article where politicians are calling for more "tough on crime" bills, get up immediately and call their office, write a letter, make an appointment and let them know this policy has failed us, the last thing we need is more of the wrong thing. Challenge them to learn more about this issue and DEMAND they take a stand on it, educate yourself on good solutions and share your "expertise" with them to make them "smart on crime." These are people that serve at the will of voters and should not have their own agenda but the agenda of those they serve.

If you are an advocate, pull yourself out of the system mindset and think about change from a different perspective. If the tables you gather around are simply talking about building a better facility, expanding bed space to stop overcrowding, offering up mental health services to children in cages, better education in prison settings or any of the hundreds of others things we ask for, just stop. Instead, DEMAND that we as the advocacy community begin to think differently about incarceration and the justice system. We don't need better cages; we need less people in cages and money from the criminal justice system reinvested in the things that DO produce better outcomes, schools, communities, higher education and equal economic growth (see chart).

Direct Expenditures in billions of dollars, by criminal justice function, 1982-1999



Data from Justice Expenditures and Employment in the United States, 1999, Spreadsheet table 1.

The Prison Index

Anyone can use our relationships with others, our friends, our churches, our social clubs and any variety of other social contexts to spread this message. You may not be able to demand that others take the same stand but you will certainly give voice to the idea that the justice system as we know it has been a complete and outrageously expensive failure. The DEMAND is on us!