



## Maryland should follow D.C.'s lead on youth rehabilitation

By **Marc Schindler** and **Tyrone Walker**

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The justice system in Maryland continues to be plagued by racial injustice. More than 70 percent of people in Maryland's prisons (double the national average) and almost 80 percent of people serving at least 10 years are black.

Moreover, 4 in 10 of those people serving prison terms of 10 years or more in Maryland are black men incarcerated before the age of 25. This is 25 percent higher than in Mississippi, which has the second-highest rate, the next nearest state.

Decades of underinvesting in neighborhoods of color, overpolicing, punitive sentencing and restrictive parole release practices have resulted in a deeply disproportionate system,

which has had an acute impact on 18- to 24-year-olds, commonly referred to as emerging adults. This is problematic because the research makes clear that emerging adults share with youths characteristics such as heightened impulsivity, elevated sensitivity to peer and social influence and risk-taking behavior. The neurobiological science underscores that the programming needs of emerging adults are more akin to those under 18 than to those over 25.

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As shown in the Justice Policy Institute's new report, "Rethinking Approaches to Over Incarceration of Black Young Adults in Maryland," many of Maryland's emerging adults receive extreme prison sentences. For those still incarcerated decades later, long sentences extinguish hope and efforts to turn one's life around. Maryland should shift its primary focus from punishment to developmentally appropriate rehabilitative services for emerging adults.

The data in Maryland are alarming, and these numbers are a call to action. With more known now about the developmental needs of emerging adults, jurisdictions around the

country are changing how they respond to this population. Maryland should not be left behind in this work, particularly given its deeply disturbing levels of incarceration and racial disparity.

We come to these justice-reform issues with unique perspectives. Tyrone is black, born and raised in the District during an era of historically high rates of crime and violence. He was exposed to the trauma of violence in his neighborhood and was eventually sentenced to a lengthy prison term as a young adult — the same demographic seen in alarmingly high numbers in Maryland.

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Marc served in leadership positions with the District's juvenile justice agency as it implemented a developmentally-appropriate approach to working with youth in D.C.'s justice system.

Despite the punitive correctional atmosphere of the 1990s and 2000s, Tyrone earned his GED and enrolled in college with the help of a Pell Grant. Eventually, he tutored other

young adults in the system, from learning how to read to GED prep. After being incarcerated for over 24 years, Tyrone was released last year. Since then, he has graduated from Georgetown University's Pivot Program and now is an associate at the Justice Policy Institute using his life experiences and knowledge of the research to inform his work on sentencing reform for young adults.

Inspiration for Maryland is available nearby. The District is engaged in a strategic planning process to implement its Youth Rehabilitation Act, which applies to individuals under 25 in its criminal justice system. The act requires developmentally appropriate services, supports and opportunities for justice system-involved emerging adults. This is similar in approach to D.C.'s juvenile justice reforms over the past 15 years.

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Improving its approach to working with emerging adults, D.C.'s Department of Corrections launched its Young Men Emerging Unit (YME) in early 2018. The YME

provides a therapeutic and rehabilitative correctional environment for emerging young men ages 18 to 24. The YME provides trauma-informed treatment and healing, counseling, restorative justice practices and workforce preparation — similar to a well-run youth correctional facility. A key element of this model is the role of mentors, like Tyrone, who were incarcerated as young adults and have spent decades in prison.

The D.C. approach, modeled after a program in Connecticut, is part of a national movement to reform how we work with young adults, and is one that Maryland would do well to explore. Other areas worth pursuing include reforms in sentence length (including allowing for a reduction in long sentences for those who committed crimes as young adults who have demonstrated they have been rehabilitated), investments in effective community-based programs and reforming probation practices for young adults.

Failure to address the needs of emerging adults in the Maryland criminal justice system has exacerbated racial inequities and driven a system that incarcerates emerging adults for decades beyond any public safety benefit. It is time for Maryland to join other jurisdictions that are developing age-appropriate rehabilitative services for justice-involved emerging adults.

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