

No Place to Go: Closures, Crime, and the Crumbling Futures of Our Complex Youth

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Abstract

Philadelphia has experienced significant increases in crime and violence in recent history. This violence extends to the classroom, impacting youth across the city and region. After several pieces of investigative journalism that surfaced decades of abuse at institutions serving juveniles with the most complex needs, Philadelphia and Pennsylvania policymakers acted swiftly to close offending institutions. This article explores what happens to youth after closures, and the collateral damage of fast decision making.

Introduction: “A War Zone”

47 students in Philadelphia have been killed in the past 18 months. Nine students at Simon Gratz high school alone were shot to death during this time span. Joshua Cornelius, a Philadelphia student, describes the environment:

“It’s a war zone, like with the drugs, with the guns, with the violence, it’s a real war zone.”

Since 2015, more than 10,000 people have been shot in Philadelphia. Homicides in the city reached 562 in 2021, up 13% from the previous year and the highest ever since police began tracking this data in 1960. The number of homicides per 100,000 residents was higher in Detroit, Cleveland, and Baltimore. Seven out ten Philadelphia residents cited crime, drugs, and safety as the most important issue facing Philadelphia, an increase of nearly 30% from just two years ago.

The current state of affairs, especially through the lens of juvenile justice, harkens back to the early 1990s when our country built bi-partisan policies around superpredators: a now vilified term for youth categorized as so violent and beyond rehabilitation that they should be treated like adults. Nearly every state passed legislation making it easier to try youth as adults, which doubled the number of juveniles in adult facilities. These youth were found five-times as likely to commit suicide and to commit a violent crime after their release.

Public policy has admirably moved away from these shortsighted policies, yet our current ‘war zone’ environment threatens progress made in ‘un-adultifying’ the youth justice system.

Reactionary public policy also threatens to derail progress made, as we continue to close facilities for youth with complex needs without a replacement to fill the void. Juveniles with the most complex behavioral history are running out of places to go, and therefore end up cycling back into detention centers and committing violent crime (or being the victim of it).

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, but we have literally closed the doors of prevention and are wishfully awaiting a cure while the streets and schools of Philadelphia resemble that of a war zone. But how did we get here?

Investigation & Demolition

In February 2019, the Philadelphia Inquirer's investigation team published a piece exposing child abuse and cover-ups spanning several decades at the Glen Mills Schools. Prior to the report, Glen Mills was heralded as the best juvenile justice program in the country and the nation's oldest and longest-standing reform school. After the report, the state of Pennsylvania acted swiftly, revoking Glen Mills' 14 licenses. The Head of School and Board Director resigned. The school closed its doors after nearly 200 years. A subsequent report from the leading investigator in the Glen Mills piece found systemic flaws in the licensing and reporting system of the state's Department of Human Services (DHS). Lisa Gartner writes:

“I built a database out of these documents. My columns included the date of the inspection; whether or not the inspection was announced; the reason inspectors came out; and whether abuse was documented. I then played around, sorting the Excel spreadsheet by date and running pivot tables. I found that DHS inspectors had responded to Glen Mills over six episodes of abuse in less than six months. But because DHS separately licensed each building, it looked to the agency as if one incident of violence occurred at each of six facilities. This important finding allowed me to demonstrate the danger of the state's licensing system.”

The governor launched a Juvenile Justice Task Force and DHS has since pursued internal reforms leading to an environment of increased licensure removal, closings, and penalization for cases of abuse. The Glen Mills scenario serves as a perfect case study for journalism leading to accelerated policy change.

Policymakers acted swiftly; what psychologist Daniel Kahneman describes as “thinking fast”. They created a demolition hammer and applied it to the system, pursuing a series of reforms and closures in order to not only protect children but also course correct decades of the over-criminalization of youth.

However, thinking fast was never counterbalanced with thinking slow. Policymakers never enacted a solution to the problem of how to better design a system of preventive interventions for juveniles with the most complex needs. The demolition hammer came down swiftly, but the pieces were never picked back up, let alone put back together.

Closures left juveniles with no place to go.

No Place to Go

A student wrote the following letter to a staff member shortly after being forced to leave Glen Mills.

I don't even know how to start this letter off, you made me realize reality. It's not nothing that I will be able to repay you, Darryl, & Gill. I am going to make you proud though, by doing what I have to do. When I eventually go home, it is going to feel funny for a long time being away from you. Even though I have a Dad and a stepdad, I still look at you as my Dad or uncle. I apologize for all of the stuff I used to do, and cause you have to do tons of paperwork. I was never blind to none of that stuff I did, but trust me If I can take it back I would. You never turned your back on me, and most of my family did. That mean everything to me, I would never forget you at all. You the definition of a man, I want to be just like you, but I don't want to work in this field. I would've been killed me. I am going to get a job at Lower Merion golf course. John Votes said he is going to get the job for me, and Darryl Barber is going to help me with some stuff. I am hurt that I have to leave. It took everything in me not to run away from my problems. I am just going to stand up and do my time. I am going to keep in contact with you. I am going to call you personally once I get settled at my next destination. I send my love to you, stay healthy my guy. This is my mom's number and you can call or text her and she will give you my number. Peace.

Shortly after leaving Glen Mills, this student started a sentence at a state prison facility. There simply is no other place for a juvenile in this position to go. A recent graduate of Glen Mills commented:

“Sorry to say they going to the youth center then right home or they being shot and killed or killing someone now face life...no matter how much we might not liked Glen Mills it saved the youth. I didn't realize it then but I do now.”

Former administrators, staff, and affiliates of the school also have lamented the lack of options for students and parents:

“With St. Gabe's closing shortly after Glen Mills, options are limited. Parents are desperate.”

“With Lima Juvenile detention center also closed I don't know of any nearby facilities. Maybe Harrisburg?”

“They should have never closed Glen Mills. Now the kids have nowhere to go.”

“Glen Mills was the substitute guardian while the real parents got their life together.”

This No Place to Go scenario has played out repeatedly of late in the regional juvenile justice system. Danielle DiMatteo, director of Delaware County Juvenile Court & Probation Services, recently stated that there was no place for five juveniles in the system. “Three of those individuals had to be released back into the community...two of those three have already been previously released into the community two and three times and they immediately cut off their GPS monitors within minutes of being released from the police station.”

Earlier in the year, these circumstances forced Delaware County to send two youth who were accused of armed robbery back home, as it had nowhere else to place them. DiMatteo also was forced to send home juveniles charged with felonies and those committing burglary, robbery, terroristic threats, harassment and simple assault.

The No Place to Go scenario gets progressively worse as layers of deeper and more horrific offenses start to bubble to the surface.

During our investigation into where youth end up after closures, a veteran of the juvenile justice system in Pennsylvania advised to look into the case of Renee Gilyard.

Gilyard, a 64-year-old mother of two, was found stabbed to death at the bottom of a ravine, her body in a duffle bag, after being brutally tortured by Xavier Johnson, a teenager whom she was fostering. Johnson, who also murdered acquaintance Jimmy Mao, was described as having extremely complex needs and No Place to Go in the child welfare system.

The Wrong Side of Pareto

The aforementioned Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force, in their June 2021 final Report and Recommendations, state that:

“Research shows most youth are not on a path toward adult crime and over-involvement in the system can increase their likelihood of reoffending. Yet most youth in the juvenile justice system have little or no prior history of delinquency, have not committed a felony or a person offense, and do not score as high risk to reoffend. Most young people enter the juvenile justice system for low-level behavior. At least two-thirds of youth enter the juvenile justice system for misdemeanors or contempt from Magisterial District Court for failing to pay fines. Despite its success, diversion is underutilized. Most written allegations do not lead to diversion, even for young people who score low risk and for those entering the juvenile justice system for the first time on misdemeanors. Youth with low-level cases end up on probation and in residential placement. No statewide criteria in statute or court rule guide responses to youth behavior by offense, risk, or prior history. A youth may be removed from home for any delinquent act or violation. 43 percent of youth sent straight to probation in 2018 score as low risk to reoffend and generally low need. Approximately 60 percent of adjudicated young people sent to residential placement are removed from home for a misdemeanor offense, and just 39 percent had committed a person offense behavior.”

This is certainly all true, but begs the question: what about the youth who are on the path to adult crime and in need of more complex care and rehabilitation? What about the other 57% of youth sent to probation? The other 40% of adjudicated young people sent to residential placement? The 61% of youth who had committed a person offense?

We need to be able to walk and chew gum at the same time. Yes, we need to address the over-criminalization and over-institutionalization of youth and reverse decades of short-sighted policymaking. Many on the Juvenile Justice Task Force have admirably and effectively taken up that cause. However, we cannot disregard the needs of a population at severe risk of violence, death, and prison.

Italian engineer and social scientist Vilfredo Pareto observed over a century ago that 80 percent of wealth is controlled by 20% of the population. This principle has been extrapolated to explain phenomena in biology, physics, and the social sciences. A detailed analysis of people from birth to age 38 demonstrates that a small portion of the population accounts for an outsized share of social costs such as crime, welfare dependence and health care. Just one-fifth of the study population in this analysis accounted for 81 percent of criminal convictions, for example.

Our current juvenile justice reform focuses on the 80 and forgets about the 20.

The Collateral Damage of Thinking Fast

In order to address the needs of the “other 20,” deliberate systems thinking and design is needed from policymakers and administrative leaders alike. Kahneman describes this process as slow, “Systems 2” thinking. However, the practice of complex systems design is far from the norm in the policymaking process, especially after media brings an issue into the collective public consciousness. Panic sets in, and decision-making needs to be swift.

Paul G. Lewis from Arizona State University has researched fast vs. slow thinking in the policymaking process. He states that:

“It may seem humbling or even depressing that, in a world of think tanks with multimillion dollar budgets, congressional offices with thousands of college-educated staff, and news organizations with sophisticated investigative capabilities, so much of people’s judgments about policies and public problems derives from “little flashes of affect” ... major empirical and theoretical developments in the behavioral and brain sciences show that “fast” cognition is firmly at the root of many decisions...”

This fast decision making, often necessary, imposes collateral damage on children and families even outside of the juvenile justice system. Service providers addressing the complex needs of children and families with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) also have experienced the swift demolition hammer developed in the wake of the Glen Mills developments.

When abuse allegations surfaced at Devereux Advanced Behavioral Health, policymakers and administrators acted quickly to close Devereux. Parents were not consulted, and children were once again left with No Place to Go. Devereux parents expressed grave concerns about the nature of this fast decision-making process without well-thought out alternatives in place:

Parents of children with special needs have a keen understanding of the importance of stability, safety, and consistency in their children's treatment...It is impossible to describe the sort of devastation and trauma this knee-jerk decision created. A child's removal from a safe, effective, and compassionate program like Devereux's, to be placed in an unknown facility, perhaps hundreds or even thousands of miles from home, should not be allowed. Disrupting the successful treatment of our children and moving them to programs that are very likely far away would have significant, lifelong consequences. We can't even begin to describe the kind of heartbreak this unconscionable act would cause if it means families cannot visit their children and participate in their care...It is nearly unimaginable that families were not even consulted before the city made this life-altering decision for us. Our children's education, treatment, happiness, and safety were all placed at the mercy of a politically motivated action.

Transformation in Favor of Demolition

The Glen Mills School sits empty on a beautiful 1,800 acres in Thornbury Township, just a stone's throw away from the war zone state of a number of Philadelphia's schools and streets. The facilities boast modern classrooms, dorms, and athletic fields. Might this facility be transformed to host juveniles with our most complex needs? Once a campus like Glen Mills is sold or permanently shut down, it becomes increasingly cost prohibitive to open a similar location with similar facilities and services. The assets of the school remain at \$105 million. What would transformation here look like? Could we once again give youth a place to go and hope for a brighter future?

We've only just begun to grapple with how to best handle juveniles with complex needs. Vidhya Ananthakrishnan, director of youth justice initiatives for The Justice Lab at Columbia University states that: "there's this sense that we know we're not doing what we need to do for kids when we lock them up, and we're not giving them the kind of support and focus on their families and all the circumstances that help them become more thriving adults...it's a question of what that actually looks like. That's the thing people are (just) starting to grapple with."

This edition of the Social Innovations Journal highlights a variety of organizations dealing with complex needs in the human services field. We should be learning from their careful systems design and service delivery models, not threatening them with a fast, swift demolition hammer.

Who will pick up the pieces? Where will our most complex youth go?

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