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Spotlight On:
Project NIA - Building Peaceful Communities

By: Emily Blumenstein

The issue of juvenile crime and how to respond to it has received much attention over the years as media coverage becomes more focused on it. This coverage fails to truly encapsulate the changes in how we as a nation have approached this issue in a variety of, sometimes conflicting, ways. First founded in 1899 in Cook County, Illinois, America's juvenile justice system began with the sole goal of rehabilitating youth. This goal evolved in the 1960's with the recognition of certain procedural protections for youth in the wake of *In re Gault*, 387 U.S. 1 (1967). Further evolving to match the conservative political climate of the 1980s, juvenile justice law launched into a "tough on crime" period with harsher consequences for youth offenders, regardless of age or developmental stage. Retreating from this "tough" 1980's juvenile justice jurisprudence, today's juvenile justice system recognizes special considerations for youth, at least with regard to sentencing. Specifically, the court in *Roper v. Simmons*, 543 U.S. 551 (2005) held that capital punishment for juveniles is a violation of the Eighth Amendment's prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment. Moreover, the Court in *Graham v. Florida*, 560 U.S. 48 (2010) held that juvenile life without parole sentences were unconstitutional for non-homicide crimes, a topic the Supreme Court again commented on in *Miller v. Louisiana*, 132 S. Ct. 2455 (2012) in finding that mandatory juvenile life without parole sentences unconstitutional.

Today we still struggle to strike the correct balance between rehabilitation and retribution in determining the appropriate response to juvenile crime. The abolishment of youth incarceration is a growing movement across the nation. One organization championing this cause is Chicago based Project NIA. Project NIA, founded in 2009, has the long-term objective of eradicating youth incarceration completely. Their mission is to "dramatically reduce the reliance on arrest, detention, and incarceration for addressing youth crime and to instead promote the use of restorative and transformative practices, a concept that relies on community-based alternatives."

NIA is a Swahili word that means "with purpose." The purpose of Project NIA is to not only abolish youth incarceration but to abolish it via community involvement. This organization emphasizes a new response to violence and crime amongst youth. Rather than prosecuting youth in the criminal legal system, Project NIA advocates for community-based accountability measures such as restorative and transformational justice approaches. Community and relationship building are the cornerstones of Project NIA's model. One community organizer, Ejeris Dixon, notes the importance of this, stating:

[I]f we need to hold someone accountable for community harm, it helps if we have a relationship with them, their family, their workplace and their community. If we need to rely on someone in the midst of violence to care for us, it helps to have a relationship that predates that interaction. If we want to divest from the police or abolish the prison system, we need to nurture relationships so that we have existing bonds that we can rely on to create new liberatory institutions. We have to deeply invest in our relationships, and not just the relationships between those of us who already know each other or agree with each other, but also those between everyone who has a stake in our collective liberation.

Project NIA lists its other goals as building community leadership to address issues faced by youth who come into contact with the juvenile justice system and creating community based responses to violence and crime by and amongst youth. The organization focuses on the deeper issues of “why” juveniles commit crime and works to address those deeper issues in addition to working around the current legal system in an effort to reduce juvenile incarceration.

Under their “Education” branch, Project NIA does both outreach and research in an effort to affect social change. Current outreach programs include the Prison Industrial Complex Teaching Collective, and an Exploring the Roots of Violence initiative. Both projects consist of workshops, events and various curriculums and zines (self-published, small-circulation nonprofit magazines), in order to make their message comprehensible for educators and organizers to take to the public. Their Prison Industrial Complex project seeks to inform the public about issues related to mass incarceration and to create community buy-in and progress towards workable alternatives. Project NIA’s Exploring the Roots of Violence Initiative offers curriculums that examine the Attica Prison uprising of 1971, gender violence, and one that specifically addresses the roots of youth violence. The identified goal of the Exploring the Roots of Violence initiative is “to help young people to constructively ‘channel their righteous rage’ towards the actual sources of their oppression.” Reports, articles and evaluations also assist Project NIA in progressing their mission. Current research topics include “Policing Chicago Public Schools,” “Chicago Youth Justice Data Project,” “Suspension Stories,” and “Chain Reaction: Alternatives to Calling the Police.”

Beside the aforementioned outreach and research, Project NIA also runs numerous advocacy campaigns. Two that are currently in action are the UN-marked Campaign and the Campaign to Close Illinois Youth Prisons. The goals of the UN-marked Campaign are:

- (1) To educate youth and adults about the importance and value of expungement of juvenile criminal records;
- (2) To change the prohibitive fee structure for juvenile expungements; [and]
- (3) To advocate for legislative changes that will make expungement of juvenile mere arrests AUTOMATIC once youth turn 18 while also simplifying the overall process of juvenile criminal record expungement.

The Campaign to Close Illinois Youth Prisons addresses the inadequacy of the juvenile justice system. Its goals include:

- (1) To educate individuals across Chicago about the negative consequences of youth incarceration;
- (2) To involve young people and adults in advocacy and organizing to eradicate juvenile incarceration;
To elevate alternatives to youth incarceration in the public's consciousness; [and]
- (3) To convince [the Governor] to recommend the closure of at least four of the eight juvenile prisons in Illinois over the next five years. While Quinn has already announced the closing of one juvenile prison in Illinois in fiscal year 2012, we believe that the state can close more juvenile prisons without compromising public safety.

Intervention initiatives are also a key component of Project NIA’s work. It both creates and supports numerous movements in its efforts at long-term change to transform youth into

individuals who turn away from crime and violence, making incarceration unnecessary. It seeks to utilize community members to assist in the running of these programs, not only to keep the programs running, but also to get the community invested in the success of the youth. Girl Talk, Circles and Ciphers, Families in Touch and Community Peacemaking and Talking Circles are the organization's four current intervention initiatives.

The Girl Talk program takes place at the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center every other week. A film is shown, after which the incarcerated girls and program facilitators discuss themes from the movie and create a related art project. Circles and Ciphers is a leadership-training program for young men who are in prison, in court proceedings and/or gang involved. The program is designed to combat the messages our society sends to youth of color who are disproportionately represented in our justice system that identifies them as "unfit to participate in society." Hip-hop ciphers, talking and peacemaking circles are used to transform participants into community organizers of a new, nonviolent community. This is done in a threefold manner: participants perform research projects on available community resources, a public forum discussing the results of that research is held, and finally, participants share their plan for the future based off their research. The program concludes with participants going into Chicago Public Schools and sharing their research results and plans with students through a "street law program."

The goal of the Families in Touch program is to support communities impacted by incarceration. This program helps families deal with transportation issues by coordinating visits to a young women's incarceration facility located in a suburb approximately thirty miles outside of Chicago. Oftentimes, transportation to such facilities can be a challenge for urban families due to the prohibitive cost and time commitment of traveling from Chicago to Warrenville. Explaining the need for such a program, a Project NIA blog explains, "if you have many children, little income, and a daughter in youth prison, the neighboring suburb can seem very distant indeed."

Community Peacemaking and Talking Circles are offered to youth and adults in order to address juvenile crime issues, resolve disputes, manage conflicts and build relationships. The circles rely on restorative philosophies and values. Core tenets include everyone in the circle being on equal footing and having equal opportunity to speak, decisions being made by consensus, and objective, agreed upon rules and goals. The circles increase community involvement in justice issues by contemplating the needs of all parties: victims, perpetrators, families and communities – all with an end goal of remaining in the community together, rather than exiling so-called problem members.

Project NIA, as a grassroots organization, encourages volunteer participation on several fronts to assist with these movements. Volunteer opportunities include: community group conferencing, peacemaking circles, administrative support, artistry, technical assistance and special projects. Project NIA also encourages supporters to track relevant legislation and make their voices heard to legislators. Its website directs those interested to the Juvenile Justice Initiative's website and the updates on current legislation posted there. How to make donations, resources, upcoming events and announcements are also posted on Project NIA's website.

These many initiatives and their combined effort to, in the words of award winning author and journalist Nell Bernstein, "burn down the house" and eradicate juvenile prisons represent a growing voice in what many believe to be the appropriate response to juvenile crime. Project NIA is one proponent of keeping youth in the community by healing both them and their communities rather than sending them away to dehumanizing institutions that are isolating and counterproductive to the rehabilitative nature of juvenile justice. The restorative and holistic

approaches Project NIA utilizes offer a sustainable way for communities to address juvenile offenders while providing the adequate level of rehabilitation and the lessons of retribution without the longstanding criminal record and other collateral negative effects of the traditional criminal justice system.

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