

OPINION

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"Ask yourself one question. 'Is it right?' Then do what you believe is best for your town, your state and your country." — James M. Cox, founder, Cox Enterprises

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Youth facilities failing our children

Georgia should take steps to stop physical, sexual abuse traumatizing girls and boys in its custody.

By Linda McFarlane

Children in Georgia's youth detention facilities are in danger — and have been for some time. In 2019, the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics released a study highlighting the rampant sexual abuse at the Macon Youth Development Center, Georgia's only residential facility for girls. A staggering 19% of kids at Macon who took part in the study were abused in the previous year — the highest rate of any girls' facility in the country. An Atlanta Journal-Constitution investigation released around the same time made clear Macon wasn't an outlier. Physical and sexual abuse

were systemwide problems, and staff perpetrators were rarely held to account.

Five years later, it's apparent little has changed. Staff abuse of children held

by Georgia's Department of Juvenile Justice continues to come to light, and, given the immense obstacles to speaking out that children face, those incidents almost certainly are just the tip of the iceberg.

But now there's growing momentum to fix the agency. In January, U.S. Sen. John Ossoff, D-Ga., directed the Government Accountability Office to give an analysis of potential federal oversight mechanisms for youth detention facilities. Ossoff's inquiry covers juvenile agencies nationwide, but the impetus was a rash of horrifying assaults inside DJJ facilities. In 2022, three children died in the state's custody, including a



Detainees at Georgia youth facilities often face systemwide abuse problems, and staff perpetrators rarely have been held to account. WSB-TV

17-year-old boy who was killed by another boy in a staff-sanctioned "fight game."

The impact of living in such conditions is devastating for anyone, but especially for children. Any child who experiences or even witnesses assault can suffer serious, long-term harm and has an elevated risk of incarceration.

In Georgia, as with most states, the chances of being ensnared in the juvenile justice system depend, in large part, on race and class.

A Black child is more than four times as likely as a white child to be held in one of the state's youth detention facilities. And though the youth detention population in Georgia is dropping overall, the rate at which Latine children are being incarcerated is rising.

Most of the kids who are in Georgia's custody are poor and come from communities that have been hit particularly hard by the vanishing social safety net. These children were failed by the system before their incarceration — and once they

are locked up, they are failed again.

Ossoff's directive to GAO provides an opportunity to shore up inadequate oversight of youth detention systems in Georgia and beyond. But there are measures Georgia can take right now to make its youth facilities safer. The DJJ has implemented the Prison Rape Elimination Act standards — a robust set of federal requirements aimed at stopping this violence in adult and youth detention facilities. Yet the PREA standards, though effective, represent only the bare minimum of what detention facilities should be doing, and adopting the rules doesn't necessarily mean safety for people in custody.

The DJJ policy instructs staff to perform full body strip searches any time a child meets with a visitor, such as a family member or an attorney. The strip search requirement doesn't violate PREA as long as the searches aren't cross-gender. But strip searches can be traumatizing regardless of the gender of the person doing

them, especially for kids who are survivors of abuse.

Georgia should follow the lead of other states that have ended this humiliating practice except in extreme cases where there's a security threat.

Another step is to lock up fewer children in the first place. Despite the dramatic decrease in youth incarceration nationwide, Georgia and other states across the U.S. still detain children at rates that eclipse those of other nations. Many kids cycle through the system again and again, often for minor infractions.

Alternatives to incarceration help kids *and* reduce crime — even in cases in which a child has committed a more serious offense. The state should be aggressively expanding the use of such programs.

These solutions might seem overly optimistic, but Georgia is in a unique position to enact real and concrete changes. For one, it has a senator willing to go to bat for children. Lawmakers have the power to hold state institutions accountable, and Ossoff's inquiry should

inspire his colleagues to exercise them.

In the end, Georgia's success in stamping out abuse will likely depend more on a local official, DJJ Commissioner Shawanda Reynolds-Cobb. Reynolds-Cobb has more influence than anyone over the day-to-day lives of the roughly 1,000 children in Georgia's custody.

Since taking over in May, Reynolds-Cobb has shown she takes this job seriously. At a hearing last year, she emphasized how trauma shapes the lives of detained children — a recognition that was a breath of fresh air for family members and advocates.

The next task is to tackle the culture of abuse that has long plagued the system. It is unacceptable for children continue to suffer in state detention facilities.

Now is the time for robust oversight and a legislative agenda that truly prioritizes their safety and well-being.

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