



SCHOLARS
STRATEGY NETWORK

California Built Too Many Youth Jails. Why Are We Still Paying To Keep Them Open?

Daniel E. Macallair, San Francisco State University

California has closed its state-run youth prisons and significantly reduced youth incarceration, the result of both deliberate policy choices and declining youth crime. But the job is not finished.

While California has dismantled its state system, it has yet to confront the massive oversupply of high-security youth facilities at the county level — an extensive network that now demands the next phase of reform.

Today, counties operate approximately 12,500 juvenile hall beds for fewer than 3,000 young people. Most facilities function at just 20% to 25% of capacity. Entire units sit empty, yet counties continue to staff, maintain, and fund these facilities as if they were full.

This is not a transitional problem. It is a policy failure.