JUVENILE JUSTICE AS A CHRISTIAN & FAMILY SUPPORTIVE POLICY ISSUE

A Theological Framework

OVERVIEW

Juvenile justice refers to the state and local court-based systems "whose purpose is to respond to young people who come into contact with law enforcement and are accused of breaking the law" (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020).[1] While the number of youth involved in the juvenile justice system has steadily decreased, 27,587 youth[2] were placed in residential facilities in 2022, and juvenile courts processed over 500,000 cases.[3] The United States incarcerates children at a rate higher than any other developed country, at four times the rate of Western Europe and over double the global rate per 100,000 children.[4] The mass incarceration and system-involvement of young people in the U.S. reflects a broken relationship between the institutions in our society that juvenile justice reform seeks to address.

Public justice calls for all institutions, including government, houses of worship, families, and other civil institutions to promote human flourishing and well-being of all of society. Christians, whose convictions about the dignity of life lead to valuing children and families, should see juvenile justice advocacy as an avenue to practically apply these convictions and pursue public justice. An understanding of the biblical themes of the image of God, justice and mercy, and the institution of family provides this framework to approach juvenile justice reform through a public justice lens.



IMAGE OF GOD

Human beings are made in God's image, signifying inherent dignity and worth.



JUSTICE & MERCY

God is a god of justice and mercy and we are called to reflect God's character. Pursuing justice and mercy are ways to embody our identity.



INSTITUTION OF FAMILY

Family is the most basic of human institutions, and is the foundation of healthy communities. Family unity should only be disrupted for the welfare and safety of its members.

BACKGROUND AND FRAMING

An understanding of the priorities within juvenile justice reform as falling within the realm of family-supportive policy first necessitates an overview of three themes present throughout scripture. While biblical passages do not explicitly label families as an "institution," the verses below highlight families as the context in which children are raised and that families should not be unduly separated. The references on the next page are not isolated passages: these themes are explored throughout scripture. By one count, the topics of justice and compassion appear in over 2,000 verses throughout the bible.[5]

Image of God	Justice and Mercy	Institution of Family
"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." -Genesis 1:27 "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image." -Genesis 9:6 "With the tongue we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God" -James 3:9	"He [God] executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing." -Deuteronomy 10:18 "The Lord works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." -Psalm 103:6-8 "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" -Micah 6:8	"...'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." -Matthew 19:5-6 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. - Ephesians 6:1-4 But Jesus called them to him, saying, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God." - Luke 18:16



A restorative vision of justice addresses both the present and future public good, breaking cycles of crime and strengthening communities to build better, safer futures.

THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS

The Center for Public Justice affirms the God-given authority of government to enforce laws, maintain public order and safety, and uphold justice for all people. Government policies must also aim to uphold the integrity and social viability of families, which do not exist in a social, economic, or political vacuum.[6][7] Juvenile justice policies that result in the unnecessary, prolonged, or permanent separation of families or do not carry out proportional punishment raise concerns about the proper exercise of government authority, the well-being of families and children, and the moral integrity of public life. It is the role of government to hold juvenile offenders accountable and seek retributive justice (proportional punishment) on behalf of the law and any victims.

However, retributive justice can not be the sole concern of the various institutions comprising the juvenile justice system. It must also ensure restorative justice, allowing for successful reconciliation and rehabilitation efforts, and addressing root causes of crime and systemic inequality within the system. A restorative vision of justice addresses both the present and future public good, breaking cycles of crime and strengthening communities to build better, safer futures.

In addition to government, the Center for Public Justice affirms the indispensable role of families, faith communities, and civic institutions in a just, pluralistic society. Each independent institution has a role in juvenile justice reform. Juvenile justice work is broad: organizations focused on youth mentoring in efforts to restore caregiver-child relationships can be seen through the lens of juvenile justice work, as can organizations aimed at alleviating youth poverty. Thus, this "care" for juvenile justice can take many forms. A church that has an established partnership with a youth development organization is involved in the juvenile justice space through a preventative angle, just as an organization that provides job training to justice-involved youth is also engaged in juvenile justice work. Church partnerships for financial, resource, and volunteer support are also avenues for faith-based mobilization. Ultimately, faith-based organizations stand as essential institutions in supporting justice-involved youth and their families.

JUSTICE-INVOLVED YOUTH: MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY

Scripture tells us that families are the most basic institutions, woven into the fabric of Creation, and the flourishing of families is critical to the flourishing of Creation (Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15, 18-24). As such, families have God-given responsibility and authority for children. This means that children, whenever possible within the constraints of justice and safety, should not be unduly separated from their families or detained in facilities far from their community. The government should not and cannot properly fill the role of parent for a child, justice-involved or otherwise.

These principles underscore the relationship between juvenile justice policies and family-supportive policies that is backed by research: measures aimed at strengthening families and improving parent-child relationships go hand-in-hand with efforts to address the root causes of youth crime, and support diversion and rehabilitation. Moreover, the inverse is also true. Children who are particularly vulnerable to unstable homes, poverty, and involvement in the child welfare system **are at increased risk** for contact with the juvenile justice system.[8]

A **two-generation approach** (2Gen) aims to support children and their parents simultaneously, recognizing that for children to thrive, their parents must be able to as well.[9] **Research shows** that children of incarcerated parents are more likely to become incarcerated themselves at some point in their lives, emphasizing once again the role of supporting families as a key component of justice reform.[10]

A CHRISTIAN CALL

Faith communities play a vital role in realizing a vision of public justice, especially for families. An understanding of the Christian values of justice, mercy, and care for families, as well as a recognition of justice-involved youth as image bearers who are often overlooked in our society, calls us to care about, and interact faithfully, with juvenile justice.

In the companion briefing titled **"Evidence-Based Practices in Juvenile Justice Reform: Practical Application of Theological Framework,"** you will find specific discussions on evidence-based practices in juvenile justice reform. Mercy, through a rehabilitative policy framework, is not at the expense of pursuing justice for victims of youth crime. Rather, justice and mercy in the context of juvenile justice reform includes acknowledging and working to address the underlying factors that influence youth crime and providing holistic support to a vulnerable population. In other words, the most comprehensive vision of juvenile justice includes different–and not mutually exclusive–conceptions of justice.

ENDNOTES

1. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, "What is Juvenile Justice?" Casey Connects (blog), published December 12, 2020; last modified April 8, 2024. https://www.aecf.org/blog/what-is-juvenile-justice
2. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, "Highlights from the 2022 Juvenile Residential Facility Census," https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/publications/highlights-2022-juvenile-residential-facility-census.pdf?utm_campaign=data_snapshots_7_26&utm_medium=email&utm_source=juvjust
3. OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book. "Estimated Number of Delinquency Cases," Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, published February 21, 2025. https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/statistical-briefing-book/court/faqs/qa06201#:~:text=Q:%20How%20many%20delinquency%20cases,45%25%20fewer%20than%20in%202013.
4. UNICEF Data, "Justice for Children," UNICEF, last modified June 2025. https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/justice-for-children/
5. "A List of Bible Verses on Poverty, Justice, and Compassion," Sojourners, published November 2017; last modified April 2025.
6. Center for Public Justice, "Guidelines: Government," https://cpjustice.org/government-2/
7. Center for Public Justice, "Guidelines: Family," https://cpjustice.org/family/
8. Sarah Vidal, et al., "Maltreatment, Family Environment, and Social Risk Factors: Determinants of the Child Welfare to Juvenile Justice Transition among Maltreated Children and Adolescents," Child Abuse & Neglect 63 (2017): 7-18. doi: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2016.11.013
9. The Annie E. Casey Foundation. "Two-Generation Approaches," n.d. https://www.aecf.org/topics/two-generation-approaches.
10. Eric Martin, "Hidden Consequence: The Impact of Incarceration on Dependent Children," National Institute of Justice, no. 278 (2017).