

# Gov. Jerry Brown calls for historic shuttering of state's notorious youth prison system

By Karen de Sá

[kdesa@mercurynews.com](mailto:kdesa@mercurynews.com)

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Following years of failed attempts to rehabilitate juvenile offenders and improve public safety, California's once-sprawling youth prison system may soon shut its gates for good.

If the Legislature approves the plan Gov. Jerry Brown released Thursday as part of his budget blueprint, California could become the first state to entirely eliminate its prisons for youthful offenders, juvenile crime experts say. The responsibility for jailing all youths would shift to local governments.

Fiscal pressure in a system with annual costs of \$200,000 per ward drove Brown to propose halting new admissions into the Division of Juvenile Justice. Under the plan, beginning next year the state's three remaining youth prisons would be phased out as current inmates complete their terms.

But Brown's vision represents far more than just belt-tightening. Already, it's being described by crime experts across the country as a historic proposal given the state's size and the notorious history of its youth prisons. Wire-mesh cages, 23-hour cell confinement and brutal staff beatings are well-documented parts of that legacy.

"California is at the front end, cutting edge of what is going to be the huge trend going forward," said Bart Lubow, who directs national juvenile justice reforms for the Annie E. Casey Foundation. "And that is the policy embrace of the fundamental truth that kids do better when they are near their homes."

corrections chief, predicted Brown's plan would be a boon to public safety. "The biggest benefit is it keeps wards close to home," Cate said. "The evidence shows, especially with young people, that it eases the return to communities and reduces victimization."

Currently, only the most serious and violent offenders are housed by the state. And California's corrections system for youths has reached other milestones that reform advocates could only have dreamed of a decade ago.

With dramatic drops in youth crime and more incentives for counties to keep their offenders close to home, the number of youths in custody has plunged from more than 10,000 wards in 1996 to just about 1,100 today. The number of youth prisons has dropped from 11 to three. And for the first time in recent history, conditions inside the facilities have finally begun to improve, said one of the system's longtime critics, Donald Specter of the Marin-based Prison Law Office.

Juvenile crime rates have plunged in every major county in California from 1998 to 2010.

The rates of serious youth crime are now the lowest since statewide statistics were first collected in 1954, according to the San Francisco-based Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice.

Those who have spent decades attempting to overhaul the youth corrections system say they never imagined the reforms would become so costly -- and the population so shrunken -- that the juvenile prisons would ultimately close.

Still, they share concerns about sending young prisoners back to county jails. Absent a state option, they predict, more youthful offenders will be sent to adult prisons, or housed in facilities even less equipped than those run by the state.

In contrast with adults, juvenile offenders have a legal right to treatment, education and training. But juvenile halls are designed for short-term detentions, and county ranch programs are generally not secure enough to provide for maximum security.

Acknowledging that counties will need help adjusting, the Brown administration has proposed giving them one year and \$10 million to prepare.

The change cannot come soon enough for Maria Sanchez, a typist from Santa Clarita whose 18-year-old son has spent the past year in the state's youth prison system for robbery. The teen began getting into trouble at age 13, attracted by gangs in his low-income neighborhood.

Sanchez said the state prison experience has left her son battered. During visits, he has limped, sported a black eye and showed her bruises on his ribs, she said. And he has spent 23 hours a day in his cell for as long as four months at a time, she added, emerging for a recreation hour shackled at the hands and feet.

"He actually told me that it is a school to become more professional -- to become criminal," Sanchez said.

Shutting down the institutions, she said, is the right thing to do. "The people who run these facilities, instead of recuperating them and fixing them up and making them better people for society, they break their spirit and make them more vicious and more violent -- then they bring them back to us even more broken than before," Sanchez said.

Her observations are echoed in volumes of state-sanctioned reports prompted by a Prison Law Office lawsuit. Under a resulting 2004 settlement agreement, the state has labored to overhaul education, safety, treatment and mental health care programs.

In the wake of Mercury News coverage of the institutional abuses, former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger prompted some early changes -- pledging, for example, to end the use of telephone-booth-sized cages placed in a circle to form classrooms.

By all accounts, broader changes took years to even begin. That has led the state system's most dedicated reformers to question whether counties will be able to create better alternatives for more serious offenders, who typically suffer from severe mental illness and childhood trauma.

"I am happy that we're going to get rid of these terrible, old facilities," said Barry Krisberg, a longtime state consultant now with UC Berkeley's law school. "Having said that, though, there's no objective information on how bad it is in counties, and how bad it's going to be when counties take on these very challenging kids."

In Santa Clara County, Deputy Probation Chief Robert DeJesus said that despite a highly regarded ranch program and a juvenile hall with adequate bed space, the county will struggle without the state option. He said there are now 14 county juvenile offenders in state custody, including three admitted last year.

"With only one year, that's going to be extremely difficult for Santa Clara County to respond," DeJesus said.

But not all counties say they are ill-prepared. Alameda County Probation Chief David Muhammad is pleased to see his cry of "Bring our kids home!" finally coming to reality. Noting that other local governments may not be as fortunate, Muhammad said he has 100 empty juvenile hall beds and money for a new facility. He said there are now 48 Alameda County youth offenders in the state system, with 12 admitted last year.

"The quality of care that the state has provided has been incredibly poor for a very long time," he said. "For it to be extremely costly and to have such poor quality of care is really a travesty to the taxpayer."