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Direct File of Youthful Offenders in Florida

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In the State of Florida, children are sent through the court system by the appointed state prosecutor to adult jails, “forced” to take plea bargains, and enter into a diversion program or prison. Upon exiting this system, they face barriers finding employment or housing. The label “convicted felon” follows them for the rest of their lives. The lack of resources and opportunities might be the reason behind the high recidivism rate. In this project, we explore the issues regarding youth offenders direct file, how it affects families especially those who are “at-risk”, why blacks are arrested and incarcerated more than any other race, and ways to reform the juvenile justice system. For this purpose, we interviewed community members with direct experience in how the criminal system in Florida interacts with the youth, the support aimed at youth prevention of offending, and the initiatives taken by non-government entities. These interviews illustrated how the State of Florida does not have effective strategies to support at-risk youth and prevent them from entering the criminal justice system. Private citizens and non-profit organizations are filling the void by creating prevention programs. Together, these findings suggest there is a need for juvenile justice reform and greater investment in prevention strategies.