

Fourth Annual Urban Child Symposium Draws Large Crowd; National and Local Juvenile Justice Experts Share Promising Practices and New Directions



Keynote speaker Bernardine Dohrn

Around two million people under the age of eighteen are arrested each year in the United States. It is not surprising that the juvenile justice system has a major impact on the country's youth population, affecting everything from adolescent development to court processes. Given the scope and depth of juvenile justice issues, CFCC chose to focus on this area for its fourth annual Urban Child Symposium on April 12. It is a subject that has resonated in the community, with the highest number of individuals registering for the event in CFCC's history.

The symposium addressed the importance of balancing public safety with the unique needs of urban children in the juvenile justice system and explored how society should address those needs in its approach to juvenile criminal behavior. Bernardine Dohrn, Clinical Associate Professor of Law and Founder and Immediate Past Director of the Children and Family Justice Center at Northwestern University School of Law set a positive tone in her opening remarks, speaking about the beneficial changes in the juvenile justice field in the past decade. She discussed recent Supreme Court decisions that have banned capital punishment for juveniles and life-without-parole for non-homicide juvenile offenses. She urged symposium participants to pay attention to the Supreme Court's recognition that children experience the world differently, as well as the Court's more developmentally accurate understanding of children's interactions with the law.

Several ideas emerged during the course of the symposium:

- **Juveniles should be directed toward community and family-based treatment rather than incarceration.** Speakers urged consideration of evidence-based, non-residential programs as the single most important alternative to sending juveniles to detention facilities, many of which are characterized by violence and poor conditions. Speakers described a number of alternative and diversion programs that are proven to be more effective in addressing juvenile crime and recidivism. Annie E. Casey's Bart Lubow and other speakers discussed the massive financial burden of juvenile incarceration (including Maryland's proposed \$100 million juvenile prison facility), which could be used, instead, to support widespread diversionary prevention and treatment programs.

- **Racial and ethnic disparities (“Disproportionate Minority Contact”) must be addressed on a system-wide basis and across all decision points in a juvenile case. Special populations, like girls, trauma victims, children with special needs, and lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgender youth, also must be protected and considered.** Many presenters, including Professor Odeana Neal, lawyer Dana Shoenberg, and Montgomery County Assistant State’s Attorney George Simms, encouraged the expansion of best practices in this area to combat current differences in outcomes based on race, ethnicity, gender, and other characteristics.
- **Laws requiring or allowing juveniles to be tried as adults should be abandoned because they hurt children and endanger society.** Professor Dohrn and other presenters reported that juvenile involvement in the adult criminal justice and prison systems is counter-productive. Juveniles often are victimized by adults in the prison system, and recidivism (re-offending) increases for juveniles who emerge from adult prisons.
- **All stakeholders – including families, schools, prosecutors, departments of juvenile services, social workers, employers, and more – should be involved in reform efforts.** Parent Advocate Kimberly Armstrong spoke poignantly about her experience as the parent of a child in the juvenile justice system. Instead of finding support and collaboration in the juvenile justice system, she encountered multiple barriers to help her son and often felt alone in advocating on his behalf. She encouraged all stakeholders in the juvenile justice system to enlist the support of parents and to treat them as valuable partners to address their children’s problems.

For more information, you can watch a podcast of the symposium proceedings and access many of the Powerpoint presentations [here](#).