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Shawn Ginwright; Julio Cammarota; Pedro Noguera
Social Justice; 2005; 32, 3; Criminal Justice Periodicals
pg. 24

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OVER THE PAST DECADE, URBAN COMMUNITIES HAVE EXPERIENCED UNPRECEDENTED social, economic, and political transformation. Global capitalism has contributed to the exodus of jobs, higher levels of inequality, and the marginalization of the urban poor. Urban youth have been particularly affected by this transformation and the concomitant social and economic conditions. The failure of so many urban school districts to prepare young people academically, the absence of early-childhood education, and the removal of after-school opportunities have combined with a growing fear of crime to shape a national consciousness that is complacent to the injustices that negatively affect urban communities and the youth who live in them.

Although policymakers express concern about the future of young people, few have actually taken steps to address the economic, political, and social conditions that shape young people's lives. This is particularly true in working-class communities of color, where punitive public policies exacerbate rather than ameliorate community problems. The failure of current policy to address important quality-of-life issues for youth of color remains a substantial barrier to their full civic participation, educational achievement, and healthy adulthood (Hart and Atkins, 2002). Researchers who study urban youth issues, and who have a grounded knowledge of the conditions they negotiate, generally have been unable to exert effective influence over relevant public policy; thus, the various ways in which young people of color respond to coercive policies, ineffective institutional practices, and bleak economic conditions in their communities have gone unnoticed.

JULIO CAMMAROTA is an assistant professor in the Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology and the Mexican-American Studies and Research Center at the University of Arizona (César Chavez Bldg., Rm. 208, Tucson AZ 85721; e-mail: Julioc@email.arizona.edu). He co-authored a seminal article on applying a social justice approach to youth development practices. SHAWN GINWRIGHT is associate professor of Education in the Black Studies Department at San Francisco State University (1600 Holloway Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94132; e-mail: shawn@leadershipexcellence.org). He co-founded Leadership Excellence, Inc., and is the author of *Black in School—Afro-centric Reform, Black Youth and the Promise of Hip-Hop Culture*. His research examines the ways in which youth in urban communities navigate through the constraints of poverty and struggle to create equality and justice in their schools. PEDRO NOGUERA is a professor in the Steinhardt School of Education at New York University (New York, NY 10012; e-mail: pedro.noguera@nyu.edu) and the Director of the Center for Research on Urban Schools and Globalization. His research focuses on the ways in which schools are influenced by social and economic conditions in the urban environment. He is the author of *City Schools and the American Dream* (Teachers College Press, 2003).

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In this article, we discuss five vital points that will contribute to the advancement of theory and policymaking for youth in urban communities. First, we argue that the current wave of policy directed at youth renders them second-class citizens who are prevented from full democratic participation. Second, we offer a critique of existing conceptual frameworks for youth development, which we call the *problem-driven* and the *possibility-driven* approaches. The problem-driven approach treats urban youth as threats to civil society, while the possibility-driven perspective views young people as passive consumers of civic life. Both frameworks obscure more than they explain youth's experiences in society. Third, we contend that urban youth behaviors should be conceptualized within the political economy of urban communities. The contemporary urban context consists of political, economic, and social conditions—urban decay, economic deprivation, health care deficiencies, racism, police harassment, and educational demise—that severely limit the full civic participation of urban youth. Urban youth's actions cannot be understood in isolation from these factors. Fourth, we discuss how an understanding of the political economy and of specific forms of social capital in community settings can illuminate an alternative, social justice framework that emphasizes young people's potential to play a vital role in social and community problem solving. Fifth, we explore critical factors in urban youth's social activism by reviewing examples of young people's collective capacity to change coercive and debilitating public policy. These examples highlight how young people succeed in building social capital in their communities in ways that resist and transform oppressive policies and institutional practices in their schools and communities.

This five-point discussion offers a comprehensive analysis of the social and economic conditions that impede young people's healthy development and outlines the major patterns of institutional failure to address these conditions. Furthermore, our proposed framework for *social justice youth policy* supports community-based social capital for young people and their collective ability to effect social change in their schools and communities. We conclude by reemphasizing that policy directed at youth must shift from the current focus on control and containment to proactive methods to increase their participation in democracy. The way a society treats its young people is a vital indicator of its quality of life. If U.S. society continues to treat youth—particularly young people of color—as potential criminals and undermines their contributions to social justice, then democracy, freedom, and fairness will only be wishful ideals in times of increasing disparity and despair.

Youth as Second Class Citizens: Barriers to Full Democratic Participation

In many ways, urban youth from working-poor communities are seen as second-class citizens in the United States. As was once the case in the South, where Jim Crow laws limited democratic participation for African Americans, youth today are subjected to hostile laws and unfair policies, but have no rights or power to change them. We share Alexis de Tocqueville's (1969) early-19th-century concern

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about democratic participation in the United States—namely, how can we reconcile entrenched social inequality with the promise of democracy and to whom do we grant full participation? Few institutions exist to insure young people's rights to full democratic participation, the lack of which grants adults full authority to develop policies that sometimes are detrimental to the well-being of young people. For example, during the past seven years, 43 states have instituted legislation that facilitates the transfer of children to adult court. The result of these laws was the dismantling of a long-standing belief on the part of juvenile courts that special protections were necessary to protect children and youth from the effects of the adult justice system, and to ensure rehabilitation (Poe-Yamagata and Jones, 2000; Polakow, 2000; and Polakow-Suransky, 2000).

These harsher sentencing policies have had a disproportionate impact on urban youth of color. Between 1985 and 1990, the number of African American and Latino state prisoners under the age of 18 increased by almost 10%, while the incarceration rate for white youth declined by 11% (Males and Macallair, 2000). Similarly, some juvenile justice and educational decision-makers share the assumption that public policy should ultimately control and contain youth to preserve general public safety (Polakow-Suransky, 2000). Despite the fact that youth crime has steadily declined since 1990, growing public fear of urban youth has contributed to harsher youth-related public policy (Hancock, 2000; Males, 1996; Males and Macallair, 2000; Poe-Yamagata and Jones, 2000). For example, Noguera (1995) examined how urban schools implemented coercive disciplinary policies as a strategy to reduce violence. He argued that measures commonly practiced to increase safety in schools, such as surveillance cameras, metal detectors, and, in some cases, security guards and police officers, actually perpetuate violence by creating schools that closely resemble prisons. He suggested that coercive practices and policies fail to create safe environments because they breed mistrust and resistance among students and teachers and ultimately disrupt learning and healthy development.

The emergence of coercive youth and educational policies around the country, which unfairly target children and youth as the source of social problems, has prompted social science researchers and public policy advocates to rethink their basic assumptions about how to support youth development, create educational opportunities, and encourage youth civic participation. Although empirical evidence indicates that young people present possibilities for civic progress (Gold, Simon, and Brown, 2002; Hart and Atkins, 2002; Yates and Youniss, 1998; 1999), policymakers often view urban youth as civic problems that should be controlled and contained, rather than as problem-solvers who can contribute to community development and social justice. Public policy would better serve young people, and ultimately their larger communities, by promoting opportunities for them to work for social justice and creating policies and programs that confront community problems that threaten their health and safety.

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Youth As Problems and Possibilities: Two Perspectives on Young People

Researchers and policymakers have embraced two dominant perspectives on urban youth. The first, which we refer to as the *problem-driven perspective,* is characterized by its central focus on youth problems such as delinquency, substance abuse, and violence. This contrasts with what we identify as the *possibility-driven perspective,* which focuses on youth assets and strategies to support healthy and productive youth development. Unfortunately, both perspectives neglect the complex ways in which young people respond to coercive public policies and fail to consider that these policies are shaped by political and economic imperatives.

Youth As Problems to Be Fixed

The first perspective focuses on the relationship between social and economic forces and the behavior they provoke in urban poor communities. The current sociological understanding of this relationship is greatly informed by William Julius Wilson's (1987) prominent and noted perspective on high-risk behaviors among blacks in poor, urban communities. He explains how economic restructuring of post-industrial cities has left urban communities bereft of stable employment opportunities. Consequently, urban residents experience severe social isolation that produces self-destructive behaviors and reproduces values that foster hopelessness.[1] Wilson maintains that youth in urban communities learn "ghetto related" behaviors, disrespect for authority, indifference toward educational achievement, and lack of a work ethic from other urban residents who have given up on legitimate means for economic security.

Similarly, Elijah Anderson (1999) explored the role of violence and aggressive behavior in urban black communities. Through his ethnography of a working-poor Philadelphia neighborhood, he illustrates how rules, norms, and values unique to urban poverty foster violence and other problematic behaviors. Anderson's view of violent and high-risk behavior, particularly related to youth, is that it is a function of local beliefs and values, which are adaptations to economic deprivation. The classification of "street" and "decent" families and youth conveys the notion that middle-class values among the "decent" families can mitigate the mire of urban violence. Street youth, characterized as violent, rebellious, and without hope, reinforce norms and values (codes of the street) that celebrate violence and illegal activity.

Katherine Newman's (1999) work illustrates the problems that arise when social scientists focus mostly on problem behavior. Newman views employment in fast food restaurants as a valid alternative for young people to escape the debilitating environment of their neighborhoods. The more time they put into work, "the more they pull away from the negative elements in their environment and distinguish themselves in every respect from the friends and acquaintances who have taken a wrong turn in life" (Newman, 1999: 109). In other words, fast food jobs offer

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them a "haven" to escape the isolation among and exposure to, as she states, "the bad apples in their environment" (*Ibid.*). Although she describes many adversities encountered within Harlem, including welfare reform, stagnant labor markets, health care problems, and housing issues, the major problem her study identifies for young people is the influence of high-risk or "bad" behaviors from other young people living there.

Anderson, Wilson, and Newman successfully described the complex ways in which economic forces may affect communities. However, their ultimate focus on maladaptive behavior, or more specifically, an improper work ethnic as the cause of academic failure and unemployment, tends to eclipse an understanding of how structural and institutionalized patterns of oppression continue to limit opportunities.

Researchers of urban youth therefore continue to oversimplify the relationship between adolescent development and political and economic conditions, resulting in a distorted cause-and-effect relationship. By highlighting only individual or group deviance, they reduce people's complex interactions with their environment to simple manifestations of maladaptive behavior (Anderson, 1999; Bourgois, 1995; Newman, 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Wilson, 1987; 1996). Urban ethnographer Steven Gregory (1998: 10) warns that descriptions of impoverished urban communities "as socially isolated and institutionally disabled by joblessness and by the exodus of the middle classes, has...obscured the struggles that black urbanites have continued to wage against racial injustices." This analytical myopia tends to encourage tunnel vision among policymakers and program developers who subsequently circumscribe their efforts to correcting individual behavior rather than addressing the social impediments and impoverished conditions that truly threaten people's mental and physical well-being.

Furthermore, cursory descriptions of the urban political economy's influence on youth often fail to address the evolving qualitative changes due to economic restructuring, namely the state's[2] shift from its primary role of supporting youth to largely facilitating punishment and control of young people (Wyn and White, 1997). For example, Newman's study took place in New York City at the advent of the Giuliani regime. Throughout most of the 1990s, Harlem and other New York boroughs were plagued by police brutality, which finally received international attention after the brutal slaying of Amadou Diallo. Although police harassment was a significant daily threat to youth of Latino and African decent in Harlem, her study hardly addresses the impact on youth of color of the punitive policies enacted by the city and state.

Due to these theoretical oversights, we are left with a view of urban youth that reduces youth problems to pathological culture and problematic behavioral adaptations. Instead of a dynamic model of how institutions such as schools might support urban youth, the only option policymakers have is to exert control over particular youth behaviors without changing the policies and institutional practices that incited the behaviors in the first place.

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Youth As Possibilities for Development

The emerging field of youth development offers an alternative perspective of young people as social assets. Rather than focusing on preventing youth problems such as violence and drug use, youth development scholars focus on understanding the resources young people need for healthy development, and the constructive ways they can use them to redefine their roles in their communities. Based on psychological theories of human development, scholars have re-conceptualized policy and practice to emphasize emotional health, empowerment, and exploration (Zeldin, 2000). The shift to positive youth development has prompted practitioners and researchers to reframe their basic assumptions about youth in ways that view youth as agents and acknowledge their self-worth and self-awareness. For example, Pittman and Fleming (1991: 7) argued for "a conceptual shift—from thinking that youth problems are merely the principal barrier to youth development to thinking that development serves as the most effective strategy for the prevention of youth problems." Since Pittman and Fleming's report, there have been a number of formulations that provide guidelines for positive youth development (Irby et al., 2001; Pittman and Irby, 1995).

Although the burgeoning youth development field provides important alternative ways to frame the role of young people in their communities, youth development research also suffers from three conceptual challenges to understanding how political and economic factors shape this process. In addition, the analysis of youth agency becomes limited to examining individual actions for improving propriety and cognitive capabilities, instead of addressing the ways in which young people collectively challenge broader patterns of injustice in urban communities. First, a fragmentary and therefore ineffective social theory has contributed to a set of anecdotal propositions about the youth development process, which tends to emphasize individual behavior rather than collective responses to marginalization. The myriad lists, models, and principles commonly found in youth development literature have ties to important psychological concepts, but are grossly disconnected from social theory and an analysis of social context (Cahill, 1997; Development, 1994; Irby et al., 2001; Pittman and Fleming, 1991). As a result, insufficient attention has been given to the ways in which identity (race, social class, gender, sexuality), community dynamics, and political and economic processes shape young people's lives. In contrast, theories of social movements, critical race theory, political economy, and inter-group relationships can contribute to a more robust theory about how urban youth respond to economic isolation and political powerlessness (Tienda and Wilson, 2002).

Second, in much of the literature, youth are conceptualized primarily as objects of policy rather than as actors who posses the rights and abilities to shape policy. Although young people in low-income communities confront barriers that constrain their personal development, they also have demonstrated the capacity to resist and

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challenge unjust institutional practices. When institutional avenues (such as voting or legal representation) for social change are not available, groups often resort to non-institutional strategies such as protests, marches, and social disruptions to create opportunities for democratic participation (Piven and Cloward, 1979). Mokwena (1998: 17) argued that youth researchers and practitioners need to acknowledge "the structural constraints placed on young people without discounting the different (often resourceful) ways that young people deal with them." He explained that young people are subjected to wider patterns of social division and social control, and agency is really about how young people negotiate, contest, and challenge the institutionalized processes of social division in which they are situated.

Third, although youth development researchers have argued that community conditions such as poverty, unemployment, and violence often impede the civic participation of youth and are serious barriers to educational success (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993; Chalk and Phillips, 1996; Garbarino, 1995), their characterizations of communities are often static, apolitical, and bereft of the underlying social and economic factors that create and sustain youth marginalization. The current formulations of youth in community settings fail to acknowledge important forms of political agency on the part of young people and generally overlook the larger economic structures bearing down on their lives. A broader framework that captures both the realities of social, political, and economic forces in young people's lives and the dynamic strategies with which youth engage them can illuminate how youth resist and sometimes transform school and community problems.

The Political Economy of Youth: The Urban Context and the Politics of Blame

These two divergent conceptualizations of young people as *problems* or *possibilities* do not thoroughly account for how young people resist coercive policies in their communities. A direct relationship exists between the economic restructuring during the past 20 years, which has left working-class youth and their families with few job opportunities, and the emergence of these coercive policies (Wyn and White, 1997). In many cases, low-wage employment in retail and food services offers the only legitimate option for those with no more than a high school degree (White, 1989). Throughout the era of economic restructuring, the maintenance of poverty in urban areas has been a financial strategy that has benefited corporations. Companies need a ready supply of low-wage workers to bolster their competitiveness in global markets and to reduce costs for services intended for their high-skilled urban employees who work in downtown business sectors (Bates, 1995). The rapid evanescence of educational opportunities and livable wages has forced urban youth to survive with limited viable economic opportunities (Bourgois, 1995; MacLeod, 1985; Sullivan, 1989).

The state's role in a democracy may include (but is not limited to) the facilitation

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of economic activity, maintenance of law and order, protection of civil rights, and establishment of the public safety (Wyn and White, 1997). However, in response to rising poverty, the state has deflected attention from the shift in governmental policies that guaranteed public welfare to those that facilitate private multinational interests—all at the expense of working-class and low-income taxpayers (Carnoy, 2000; Castells and Henderson, 1987; Sassen, 1991; 1994; 1998). When public concern emerged over the state's abandonment of social welfare, such as the decline of education, rise in unemployment, or inaccessibility of proper healthcare, blame was channeled to a particular disenfranchised constituency, such as immigrants, people of color, or urban youth (Davis, 1986; Walker, 1995).

This shift of policy focus has been devastating to public welfare in general, and to urban youth in particular. For example, youth of color in California have been the target of conservative legislation that has whittled away educational equity, economic opportunities, and political power. In November 1994, the passage of Proposition 187 denied undocumented immigrants public benefits. In November 1996, Proposition 209 banned affirmative action policies in California's public schools, public universities, and city and county governmental offices. In June 1998, Proposition 227 banned bilingual education in public schools. In March 2000, the Juvenile Justice Crime Bill (Proposition 21) allowed courts in California to sentence youth as young as 14 years old as adults and place them in adult prisons. The bill also gives broad powers to courts and police to detain youth merely suspected of involvement in local gangs, and not necessarily the gangs associated with organized crime, but more culturally based street gangs in which young people at most wear similar apparel and guard their neighborhoods.

In urban schools, policies that disproportionately target working-class youth of color have gained currency in public debate (Dohrn, 2000; Polakow-Suransky, 2000). School districts around the country have adopted policies of containment and control to ensure school safety. Noguera (2003) has found that in the past 10 years, schools have increasingly taken on the appearance and function of juvenile detention facilities. Therefore, instead of dealing with social and economic problems through the curriculum, some schools have implemented a variety of punitive measures, including segregating lunches by racial/ethnic groups, requiring a student ID to enter classrooms, constructing fences topped with sharp protruding edges, and increasing police presence on school campuses (Polakow-Suransky, 2000). A Foucaultian (1977) analysis would underscore how urban schools are evolving into institutions of surveillance and control with the intention of circumscribing human agency.

The following section delineates a broader conceptual approach to youth development that promotes and expands young people's agency and highlights how young people challenge and resist coercive policies in their schools and communities.

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An Alternative Theoretical Framework: Social Justice in Youth Policy

Although pro-social development among working-class youth of color is severely limited by coercive policies, they should not be perceived as incapacitated passive victims of oppression (Ginwright and James, 2002). They are certainly actors who are capable of responding to coercive policies. Thus, central to our understanding of youth, social justice, and communities is that recognition of institutional and structural barriers to democratic participation must be combined with an analysis of how young people negotiate, challenge, and resist social control. We define social justice as a critical awareness of the systems and institutions that promote or hinder progress toward social equality and respect for human dignity.

One way to understand youth and social justice is through the lens of social movement theory. As youth respond to institutional barriers in their lives, they do so through various modes of collective action. Unlike theorists who view such collective action as irrational, violent, emotional, and deviant (Smelser, 1968; Useem, 1985), we contend that youth collective action is a rational response to state control and repression. Researchers have documented the various ways in which people act collectively to respond to state repression (Fantasia, 1988; Gamson, 1990; Muller and Opp, 1986; Olson, 1971). Other researchers have argued that when institutional means of social change are not available to groups with grievances, they employ the only means of social disruption available to them (Piven and Cloward, 1979). Youth who grossly lack political and economic power use school walkouts, marches, and other forms of civil disobedience, which render seemingly static institutions vulnerable to change (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1969; Carson, 1981; Martínez, 1998; Newton, 1973; Piven and Cloward, 1979). HoSang, James, and Chow-Wang (2004) found that youth groups frequently address issues related to unfair suspension and expulsion policies, armed police officers on campus, unsanitary bathrooms, and inadequate public transportation to and from school. The authors also emphasize that young people frame these issues through a broader political analysis of power and operate within networks of intergenerational allies, collaboration with other youth groups, and partnerships with larger political organizations. These forms of capital—social and political—are important ingredients for effective community mobilization for young people (Sampson, Morenoff and Earls, 1999).

Social Capital and Community Change

Recent formulations of social capital provide a useful framework for conceptualizing community-level attributes, whereby young people exhibit collective efficacy through organizational networks and engagement with adults (Sampson et al., 1999). Sampson, Morenoff, and Earls (1999: 635) argued that "collective efficacy for children is produced by the shared beliefs and a collectivity in its conjoint capability for action. The notion of collective efficacy emphasizes residents' sense of active engagement...." This view of social capital acknowledges structural constraints

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in communities and residents as active participants that facilitate neighborhood change. Borrowing from Sampson's (2002) notion of "community social capital," we place emphasis on collective community-level attributes in which residents maintain intergenerational ties, share information and advice with young people, and establish clear pathways for civic participation for young people in community settings. Community social capital is predicated on the idea of self-determination for community residents to bring about desired community change. For youth in communities, social capital is closely linked to connections with community-based organizations, intergenerational partnerships, and participation in broad networks of informational exchange about political issues, ideas, and events (White, 2002).

Community social capital leads us to three assumptions about youth, social justice, and communities. First, youth have the right to participate in the creation of policies that affect them. These rights are closely tied to civil rights, where youth have the opportunity to exercise full and unencumbered civic participation. Given that young people pay taxes but are subjected to policies over which they have no voice, extending rights to youth is a fundamental step toward social justice and equality. This is particularly true in a democratic, capitalist society in which opportunities for civic participation exist in a fundamentally unequal political and social context.

Second, we view youth as agents who have the potential to act and thereby play a role in transforming the conditions in the neighborhoods and communities in which they live. Although youth of color are often the target of ineffective and misguided policy, they respond to these obstacles by organizing their peers and/or by forming coalitions with adult allies. In a democratic society, young people play a vital role as civic actors and—through participating in policy development—can continue to develop more effective practices in their schools and communities.

Third, our understanding of the youth development process shifts the theoretical focus from individual developmental trajectories to youth as collective community actors. This shift views youth as key agents in community change and conceptualizes communities as dynamic, rather than static, environments. Urban communities are shaped by economic, political, and social forces that can either support or inhibit the youth development process and educational success. Vicious police brutality, racist school policy, and insufficient investment in educational and economic opportunities impede academic success and important developmental outcomes for youth of color in urban communities. Our understanding of youth and social justice centers on analyzing the power dynamics between various social groups in the urban context and the political and economic circumstances that shape these dynamics.

Examples of Youth Social Activism: Resistance to Zero Tolerance

Despite the lack of effective public policy directed at improving the lives of urban youth, there are numerous examples of low-income communities that have

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challenged, shaped, and designed public policy in ways that meet their needs (Cervone, 2002; HoSang et al., 2004; James and McGuillicuddy, 2001). Contrary to Putnam (2000), who suggests that the United States is experiencing dangerously low levels of civic, community, and political participation, there is evidence that young people are resisting coercive, zero-tolerance policies in their schools and communities (Gold et al., 2002; Murashige, 2001). Arnett (2002: 328) notes that youth are frustrated by and alienated from conventional political processes, and political engagement is often directed "toward specific areas of importance to them, where they believe they are more likely to see genuine progress," rather than toward conventional civic participation.

In April 1999, representatives from 20 youth organizations formed the Youth Force Coalition to proactively fight for educational reform and challenge "zero tolerance" policies in their schools. Working with adult allies, the Youth Force Coalition planned direct actions, designed and distributed material to educate the public, and held meetings and hosted conferences on their strategy to reduce jails and increase funding to improve their schools. In February 2000, over 700 students walked out of 15 schools in the San Francisco Bay Area to protest California's Juvenile Justice Crime Bill, which encouraged tougher sentencing by prosecuting youth in adult courts. The students demanded that policymakers focus less attention on incarcerating youth and pay closer attention to better books, improved facilities, and more equitable educational opportunities for working-class youth of color.

Although the proposition passed in March 2000, and policymakers disregarded the deficiencies of the school system in favor of a blatantly non-rehabilitative legal system, the campaign demonstrated a new commitment and energy among urban youth of color for demanding power in school and community reform efforts. For example, in 2001, the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights in Oakland, California, formed Books Not Bars (BNB), a coalition of youth organizers, educators, and community members dedicated to reallocating public resources from juvenile incarceration to educational opportunities and school improvement initiatives. BNB organizes and educates youth in schools about how large corporations benefit from the public dollars that are dedicated to incarcerating disproportionate numbers of youth of color. The BNB aims to rehabilitate youth and community members that have made mistakes in their lives through education and restorative justice principles. Through partnerships with adult allies, BNB combines public education, grass-roots organizing, direct action, and advocacy related to criminal justice policy and to reforming schools. BNB sees the plight of urban school reform as intimately tied to issues of juvenile justice. California's rapid expansion of prisons, jails, and other correctional facilities since the 1990s—coupled with the state's dramatic reduction in per pupil spending—has prompted BNB to seek alternative sentencing practices and to promote the redistribution of public dollars toward educational resources.

In May 2001, 70 young people from BNB marched into a meeting of the

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California Board of Corrections to persuade the board to deny pre-approved state funding for Alameda County to build the largest juvenile hall in the country. For about two years, Alameda County officials had been promoting the construction of a massive 330-bed juvenile hall and only needed a "rubber-stamp" by the full Board of Corrections. Armed with statistics, reports, and financial forecasts, young people persuasively presented the board with a sound rationale and prompted it to deny funding. In a 10 to 2 vote, the board rejected Alameda County's $2.3 million funding request to build the prison. Though it did not explicitly focus on educational reform issues, the BNB campaign signaled to educational experts the power and value of youth-led initiatives.

Similarly, in October 2001, youth gathered and formed the Schools Not Jails campaign and set up a network of youth activists in California who organize around various educational reform issues. The campaign has three demands. The first is to create educational priority zones in low-income communities of color, where schools would receive significant funding and resources. The second is to have a statewide review that would assess the effectiveness of standardized testing. The third is to support a statewide effort to have every school in California offer ethnic studies, women's studies, and queer studies for its students (Schools Not Jails, n.d.). Students involved in the Schools Not Jails campaign drew clear connections between youth incarceration and educational resources.

Despite the onslaught of coercive public policy in schools and communities, youth can resist and change policy in ways that improve quality of life and educational opportunities. As collective actors, these groups mobilized specific forms of social capital in their neighborhoods to facilitate change in their schools and communities. Through intergenerational partnering, young people developed important organizing skills that translated into participation in neighborhood campaigns. In addition, ongoing exposure to information, ideas, and events provided rich opportunities for young people to engage in community change activities. Our focus is on how social capital contributes to collective engagement in school and community change efforts. These examples provide insight into how researchers and policymakers can rethink strategies to expand, deepen, and foster community-based social capital for youth and support their collective efforts to engage in school, community, and social change.

Conclusion: Toward Social Justice in Youth Policy

Given the ways in which many young people respond to punitive policies in their everyday lives, what should be the form and content of a reasonable set of policies that support youth in their communities? This question is derived from the pressing nature of the problems young people confront and from the clear failure of traditional policy strategies. The question of how to respond creatively with policies that support rather than punish youth is difficult because it requires policymakers to think comprehensively about the nature of the problem. Unfortunately, our

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society has a poor track record when it comes to devising holistic public policies concerning complex social issues.

Those who criticize the current emphasis on punitive approaches to youth policy have a responsibility to enter the policy debate with reasonable ideas and viable alternatives. To be taken seriously, those who object to current policy must move beyond critique and put forward alternative policies that affirm youth initiatives and provide opportunities for democratic participation. To substantively affect policies that support youth, we must work within the limits of what is possible at this historical moment, even as we push those limits further. The challenge is to figure out how to be heard and be taken seriously within debates over policy, rather than being content with the inconsequence of being comfortably planted on the periphery with other critics. Once we have entered the fray of policy debates and start to work toward the development of enlightened policies and practices, then we may confront the difficulty involved in educating public officials, the media, and the public on the need to rethink assumptions about the possibilities of innovative strategies to support youth through public policy. We hope that this will lead to new conversations and innovative strategies that support marginalized youth in their communities. Our ultimate goal should be to facilitate the creation of public policies that promote and support young people's political agency so that they may challenge and transform the oppressive conditions impeding their healthy transition into adulthood.

NOTES

1. The concept of social isolation refers to prolonged periods of unemployment for urban residents, which leave them without opportunities to develop important behaviors associated with working; in particular, they are left without opportunities to develop a work ethic. Further compounding this problem is the flight of urban middle-class residents, who take their work ethic with them to the suburbs. Poor urban dwellers, unable to find jobs elsewhere, end up surrounded by or "isolated" with other poor people who haven't had jobs in years. Thus, social isolation results in the perpetuation of certain "pathological" behaviors, such as a lack of a work ethic, stemming from persistent joblessness. See also Wilson (1996).
2. We refer to "the state" as a network of governmental institutions such as the legislature, the judiciary and state and federal courts, law enforcement such as the police, and hospitals and schools.

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