NPQ

How Hawaiʻi Is Ending Youth Incarceration After More Than a Century of Colonization

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Image Credit: Julian Armstrong

A young Native Hawaiian farmer shows up to work every day to cultivate indigenous crops using traditional and contemporary methods to feed his island home community. The best part of going to work, he says, is the view. Each day, he farms within the embrace of the Olomana mountain peak's undulating, lush ridge. Sitting between the farm where he works and the view that he loves is the Hawaiʻi Youth Correctional Facility.

Machijah Perez-Fonseca is one of hundreds of young people who set foot on the 500-acre property known as the Kawailoa Youth and Family Wellness Center. When youth here gaze at the land where their ancestors once walked, not all see the view through the same lens. While Machijah's mountain view is from the center's farm, some youth see it from behind the prison's barbed wire. Others see it from a shelter bed.

Machijah was one of those young people, once. Not long before becoming a full-time farmer, Machijah stayed at the shelter for unhoused youth, steps away from the farm. His move from the shelter to the farm—and how it changed his life and perspective—is part of a broader effort to end youth incarceration in Hawaiʻi.

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To date, the collective advocacy work of local community leaders, the State of Hawaiʻi, and national experts have reduced the state's youth incarceration rate by 82 percent. Now, the State of Hawaiʻi is working toward a 100 percent reduction—but it's not an easy task.

Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders are overrepresented at every stage in the juvenile justice system. Due to historical trauma that predates the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom, Indigenous people are more likely to experience poverty than their nonindigenous neighbors—and in their own homelands.

A History of Inequality

Almost immediately after setting foot on the Hawaiian Islands, foreigners gradually separated Native Hawaiians from their cultural practices. At the time of foreign arrival, the United States government recorded that "the Native Hawaiian people lived in a highly organized, self-sufficient subsistence social system based on a communal land tenure system with a sophisticated language, culture, and religion."

The communal land tenure system, or ahupua'a system, is a land division that extended from the uplands to the ocean and was subdivided and managed by the people. Each person in their own divisions had a role—whether it was to farm, fish, irrigate, heal, teach, or something else, the people in a village relied on each other.

The islands' colonizers gained economic power through private land ownership, disrupting the connection and communal land system that the native people had with their *'āina* (land).

Missionaries were also sent to Hawai'i to open boarding schools for children to "reduce the Native Hawaiian language ('Ōlelo Hawai'i) to writing, teach Native Hawaiians to read and write, and promote Christian conversion."

During this time, Native Hawaiians continued to pass on their genealogy and stories orally. By the turn of the 19th century, however, only 16 percent of children in public schools were taught in Hawaiian. With few written recordings of ancestral history and knowledge, much was lost, never to be recovered.

Colonization and Youth Reform Schools in Hawai'i

In 1864, Hawaiian King Kamehameha V—a proponent of Hawaiian cultural practices who sought to strengthen the monarchy amid foreign power struggles—established the islands' first reform school system. These schools were modeled after English and American workhouses that were designed to manage "orphans, abused and neglected children, and law violators of minority age," or juvenile delinquents. Some boy's schools practiced farming to create a self-supporting facility, teach "habits of industry," and provide "therapy and training."

Industrial schools in Hawai'i followed a long history of punitive punishment, with practices of "unequal treatment for boys and girls, a poor education system, and an emphasis on work" that continued throughout the 20th century. While the state obtained responsibility for these wards after annexing Hawai'I in 1898, there was little agreement on how to treat these youth.

Hawai'i hosted approximately seven Federal Indian boarding schools (located at multiple sites) that targeted the American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian populations to "assimilate them, and, consequently take their territories." One of these Hawai'i schools was the Industrial and Reformatory School for Girls, later renamed the Kawailoa Training School for Girls. While the school initially sought to reform Hawaiian youth using punitive measures, its campus would later become a safe place for young people to heal.

Colonization and the Hawaiian Kingdom's illegal overthrow in 1893 have had lasting impacts on the state's carceral system. Not only was Queen Lili'uokalani—the last sovereign monarch—forced from her reign under US occupation, she was imprisoned in her own palace. She noted that the purpose of her sentencing was to "terrorize the native people and to humiliate me." The queen's incarceration foreshadowed the NHPI people's future.

After the kingdom's overthrow, Hawaiian language and cultural practices were banned in schools and discouraged at home for nearly a century, until a Hawaiian cultural renaissance allowed for the language's use and revival.

Toward Juvenile Justice Systems Change

In 1961, all industrial schools and operations for boys and girls merged into the Hawai'i Youth Correctional Facility. Around this time, US family court systems changed how they dealt with "troubled" youth.

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A movement to reform the juvenile justice system also began with the “objectives of making juvenile justice beneficial for youthful offenders while at the same time protecting society from those youths. To strike a balance between these objectives in the context of different types of juveniles in trouble has been the dilemma.” Progress proved slow.

Studies have shown that system-involved youth, especially those who are incarcerated, are three times more likely to enter adult prison later in life, compared to their peers who haven’t been through the system. The displacement of Native Hawaiians from their lands results in “higher poverty rates and lower incomes than non-Native Hawaiians in Hawaiʻi.” As a result, NHPI youth are more susceptible to substance abuse, trauma, loss of loved ones, broken relationships, depression, human trafficking, and economic instability—all worsened by confinement. With no true sentiment of self and place, many youth take to the streets to redefine themselves. Reversing these outcomes requires an equitable model of healing.

To this end, Olomana School began offering alternative educational services to youth wards in 1974—at a time when the Native Hawaiian renaissance emerged to return perspective and power to local communities, their voices, and culture.

Despite such efforts toward system reform, a 1988 report found that the Hawaiʻi Youth Correctional Facility “provides no meaningful rehabilitative programming for incarcerated youth.” In response, the Office of Youth Services was established in 1989 to manage the facility and provide and coordinate prevention, diversion, and intervention services.

Still, over the next few decades, reports continued to expose the disproportionately high representation of Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and mixed-race youth in Hawaiʻi’s juvenile justice system. Native Hawaiians comprise one-third of the state’s total youth population but over half of the prison population. For change to happen, policy had to change too.

In 2014, Hawaiʻi’s legislature enacted House Bill 2490 Act 201, a call for systems change to reduce the youth correctional facility’s population by 60 percent by 2019 and redirect resources to mental health, substance use treatment, and other interventions. The bill reduced court referrals, improved probation for justice-involved youth, and engaged with community-based programs for youth support. That same year, prostitution among minors was decriminalized, which meant underaged sex-trafficked victims received support and treatment rather than punishment.

The State of Hawaiʻi partnered with national organizations for further support in an effort to move the recently passed juvenile justice reform bill forward. According to The Pew Charitable Trust’s Public Safety Performance Project, “the state lacked effective community-based alternatives, leaving judges with few options to hold youth accountable and provide them with necessary services.” Their summary shared findings and recommendations for ways to address the high cost and poor outcomes of juvenile commitment policies. The Annie E. Casey Foundation also developed the Judiciary’s Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative to “reduce the unnecessary use of secure detention and re-arrest rates by 40 percent.”

In 2018, the Hawaiʻi Youth Correctional Facility also worked with the Vera Institute of Justice to reduce female youth incarceration. By 2022, Hawaiʻi announced that there were zero girls incarcerated for the first time since 1961. While the population of incarcerated girls can increase on any given day, this marked a pivotal moment for systems change toward equitable treatment of the NHPI population, setting a precedent for Hawaiʻi and other marginalized communities.

That same year, Senate Bill 2791 Act 208 rebranded the Hawaiʻi Youth Correctional Facility and Olomana School campus as the Kawailoa Youth and Family Wellness Center to reclaim ancestral land ties and reflect the state’s shift from punitive models to more holistic therapeutic diversion and treatment programs. Community-based nonprofit organizations began establishing themselves on campus, taking over the very buildings used for the Kawailoa Training School for Girls.

From Punitive Systems to Indigenous Programs

The Kawailoa Youth and Family Wellness Center is named after a nearby spring that flows down Olomana mountain, runs beneath the Hawaiʻi Youth Correctional Facility, and lets out near the main highway. In Hawaiian, the word for wealth is *waiwai*—the word for water, *wai*, said twice—because abundant water is wealth, and without it, there is no life. The long waters that run through the campus' sacred grounds nurtured ancestors and reflect the journey that young people can take at the new center.

Until now, few supports existed to reconnect Native Hawaiians with their land, identity, and community. Many of the campus' system-involved youth had committed petty crimes like theft and burglary. That's why programs available on the Kawailoa campus engage youth in activities that give back to, rather than take away from, the community—like distributing food in nearby neighborhoods, leading farm activities with the elementary school next door, or working out with families and friends. Through such practices, youth see themselves as people who contribute, care for, and belong to a community. In the process, they become part of their community.

The Kawailoa campus started welcoming several community-based organizations to its fold in 2018. In 2020, the campus and its new partners joined forces as the Opportunity Youth Action Hawaiʻi group to best serve system-impacted youth. OYAH includes the following nonprofit organizations and state facilities:

- Hawaiʻi Youth Correctional Facility: The state's youth prison
- Olomana Youth Center: The public education facility on campus that hosts an alternative learning center of the Hawaiʻi Department of Education
- Residential Youth Services and Empowerment: A temporary, transitional shelter for homeless youth ages 14–24
- Hale Kipa's Hale Lanipōlua Assessment Center: The assessment center for sexually exploited minors and emergency shelter for sexually exploited youth up to age 19
- Kīnai ʻEha: The educational workforce and vocational training center for youth ages 14–24
- Partners in Development Foundation: A Hawaiʻi nonprofit that serves low-income and rural families and communities and plays an overarching administrative role
- Kupa ʻAina: The sustainable agriculture and vocational training farming program of the Partners in Development Foundation, which uses *aloha ʻāina* (love of the land) to heal youth, families, and communities

Funding Indigenous Models, Investing in Youth

Most recently, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation announced that OYAH's project, Kawailoa: A Transformative Indigenous Model to End Youth Incarceration, was one of five awardees of the Racial Equity 2030 Challenge, an "open call for bold solutions to drive an equitable future for children, families, and communities worldwide." OYAH received a $20 million award for the next eight years to pivot system-involved youth from punishment toward a model that empowers youth to become leaders of social justice in Hawaiʻi and other BIPOC communities facing similar challenges. With this achievement, the state government could continue its work and make space for community organizations to play a larger role in transforming the system.

More than 300 youth step foot on campus each year with an opportunity to heal and become healers. They include Machijah, who grew up on the streets of Honolulu. RYSE reached out to him and set him up in their shelter. After evaluating his life on the streets, he decided to make a change. He attended RYSE's renter's rights courses and earned a program stipend while working at the Kupa ʻAina farm on campus. Eventually, he became a full-time farmer.

Together, OYAH's partners provide an ecosystem of support in a modern day *puʻuhonua* (healing sanctuary) for youth like Machijah to begin to feel what it's like to belong.

> **For many NHPI youth, the only way to counter over a century of colonization and its systems is to reconnect with their ancestors' ways.**

The OYAH partners pursue levers of change to transform systems and end youth incarceration in Hawaiʻi, all based on Indigenous cultural practices. The first such lever is a ***puʻuhonua***, or healing sanctuary of people and programs that form an ecosystem of support, replacing "corrections" with holistic and culturally grounded care. Next is ***kapu aloha***, or healing practices and policies instilled by and practiced alongside elders that shift mindsets and systems toward diversionary alternatives and therapeutic methods that empower youth and communities. The third is ***pilina ola***, or healing partnerships and networks of care that apply cultural practices across agencies and islands, sharing learnings with BIPOC communities beyond Hawai'i.

For many NHPI youth, the only way to counter over a century of colonization and its systems is to reconnect with their ancestors' ways.

During the communal land tenure system, when someone committed a crime, they were seldom sent away to a prison-like environment because the absence of an individual and their role would not contribute to the community's growth. Other means of discipline and therapeutics, like *ho'oponopono*—using traditional protocol to set right what is wrong in families—allowed people to heal within their communities. OYAH's ecosystem of support continues and builds on the ancestral practices of a native system to heal native people today.

Often, Machijah is found leading farm projects with groups from the community, from neighbor campus sites like RYSE, Kinai 'Eha, Olomana Youth Center, or HYCF. He gets to share his love for the *'āina* on which he works and is proud to share knowledge of the indigenous crops that his ancestors nourished themselves with centuries ago. He is a beacon of hope for those in whose shoes he once walked.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Annabelle is an Asian American storyteller whose multicultural background and studies i…