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Human rights violations in our own backyard

Sumayyah Waheed

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Dec. 10 marks the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As we call on our global leaders to renew our commitments to universal justice and dignity, Californians must examine how we treat our youth.

California runs one of the worst, most expensive youth prison systems in the nation. As we celebrate a document proclaiming that childhood is "entitled to special care and assistance," policymakers must seize this opportunity to establish an effective, comprehensive system of care for troubled youth that fulfills our human rights obligations.

The state Division of Juvenile Justice is notorious for guard beatings, preventable suicides, filthy conditions and nonexistent programming. Young people held in its warehouse-like prisons regularly suffer violence, abuse and neglect. The systems costs more than \$436 million a year - equaling an outrageous \$241,400 per youth. Even more outrageous is the division's 72 percent recidivism rate - among the worst in the nation.

In 2004, California settled a lawsuit against the division for inhumane conditions. Four years later, the judge has found that conditions are still deplorable and juvenile justice is in gross violation of the settlement. Youth prison conditions not only violate the court settlement - they also are rife with human rights violations.

Hilda Montes knows this all too well. Her son has been in and out of the youth prison system for four years. One Mother's Day, Montes received a phone call at 9 p.m. from a youth prison doctor. Her heart almost stopped as the doctor said that her son had attempted suicide that morning. He was alive, but in critical condition. He had tried to hang himself. Frantic, Montes immediately tried to see her son, but youth prison staff prevented her from seeing him for four nightmarish days.

Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights prohibits torture and "cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." The youth prison system is degrading at best, and torturous at worst. Youth suffer medical neglect, excessive isolation, and unchecked aggression from guards.

When Haydee Amaya visited her son at the Preston youth prison in Ione (Amador County) in November, she was horrified. His face was covered in what looked like hundreds of severely inflamed mosquito bites leaking pus. Luis told her he had been maced a week earlier. The guards had refused to allow him and other youth to properly wash off the irritant. So the young men

suffered chemical burns from their faces to their chests. Haydee frantically contacted guards, nurses, doctors, her son's parole agent - even Preston's superintendent. No one has responded to Haydee's requests, even for simple information. Instead, prison guards have harassed her son for his mother's involvement with Books Not Bars, the campaign I direct.

Now her son is too frightened of retaliation to tell Haydee what he's experiencing.

According to the court order, youth prisons are still marked by "unsafe conditions, antiquated facilities ... [and] hours on end with nothing for youth to do." Youth in California prisons languish for all but three hours a day in solitary lockup. Those with mental health needs receive care described by the court as "toxic."

What's more, youths of color are disproportionately shipped to Division of Juvenile Justice prisons - making up a staggering 90 percent of the population - in direct contradiction of the declaration's Article 7, which holds that "[a]ll are equal before the law."

A better way exists: Other states have shifted their resources to programs that help youth turn around their lives - at a fraction of the cost. Missouri's system of secure, home-like therapeutic centers for high-risk youth is hailed nationwide for its effectiveness. Likewise, Washington's use of diverse alternatives saves the state money while successfully rehabilitating youth.

California cannot afford to waste hundreds of millions of dollars on a broken system that is incapable of fixing itself. In the spirit of human rights, policymakers must invest in a comprehensive system of care and rehabilitation for our youth. The state must scrap the Division of Juvenile Justice's obsolete, abusive prisons and establish Missouri-like centers that respect human rights and effectively treat youth close to their families. As we denounce human rights violations committed abroad, let us consider our own backyard. We must build a California that lifts up our youth instead of locking them down.

To read the u.n. declaration

The United Nations was founded by 50 countries meeting in San Francisco in 1945. Today, it includes 192 countries. While its main purpose is to prevent war, the United Nations also cites in its charter the need to "reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights." These rights belong to everyone. To read the declaration, go to www.unhcr.ch/udhr/index.htm.

Sumayyah Waheed is the policy director of Books Not Bars, a campaign of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights in Oakland. For more information, go to www.ellabakercenter.org.

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