



SEASON 4 EPISODE 1

Where Juvenile Detention Looks More Like Teens Hanging Out

There's a place in rural St. Johns, Arizona, where teens who have encounters with officers of the law can play pool, make music, and get mentored instead of going to jail. It's called The Loft, and it's the brainchild of a judge who wanted to save the county hundreds of millions of dollars and divert young people towards the support many were not getting at home. Reported by Ruxandra Guidi.

You can read an expanded version of this story at [High Country News](#).

Intro Music.

Mitzi Miller: I'm Mitzi Miller, and this is 70 Million.

The juvenile corrections system has been the subject of scandals, scrutiny and calls for reforms for years. While juvenile incarceration rates have declined nationwide—by 66% between 2000 and 2019—the US still has the highest youth incarceration rate in the world. As of 2019, approximately 36,000 young people were held in residential placement on a given night. Most of them were young people of color.

Even as juvenile detention has plummeted across the country, racial disparities have grown worse: roughly two-thirds of incarcerated youth in 2019 were people of color. Still, there are signs that public opinion is shifting. And policy is changing, too.

In 2020, California decided to dismantle the state's Department of Juvenile Justice, and jurisdictions all over the country are making similar moves on large and small scales.

Today, we're taking you to Saint Johns, Arizona, to look at how changes to the juvenile corrections system are playing out in a rural county.

Ruxandra Guidi has our story.

"We're going live right now."

"Oh, We're live right now, there we go... We have Facebook, Twitter and Instagram..."

Guidi: A group of about three dozen excited teenagers are listening to an announcement by Apache County Judge Michael Latham.

Michael Latham: *"So hopefully this is something that will be here for decades and you guys will be the first ones who are able to enjoy it. So we're glad that you guys could be here."*

Guidi: It's early fall 2017, and this is the grand opening of Saint Johns' first center dedicated to teens — Latham is introducing the people who'll be running it.

“Let me introduce Victor — this is Victor Chavez... [cheers] Victor is our coordinator, so he’ll be here pretty much every day. As well as Paul Hancock, you guys all know Paul... [cheers]”

Guidi: Victor and Paul are smiling, facing the energetic teens. They’re probation officers — in other words, they work for the county. But they dress in civilian gear — T-shirts, jeans, baseball caps — because they’ve been tapped by Judge Latham to run this new facility, The Loft Legacy Teen Center. It’s a county-run resource and activity center, in this small town where kids often can’t find much to do — or people to talk to.

Hannah Wilkinson: *It was like right at the end of my freshman year into the summer of my freshman year, I heard about it. I was like, oh, that’s cool. I didn’t really think anything of it, I didn’t think it would be this cool...*

Guidi: Hannah Wilkinson was there.

Wilkinson: And then like I walked in, I was like, there’s TVs, there’s a pool table! Like there’s just like all this cool stuff for kids to do. And it was really exciting.

Music.

Guidi: The Loft is in the old juvenile detention building on Saint Johns’ main strip but all repurposed and cleaned up: it has high ceilings and a central open room from which you can access four smaller rooms. It’s been made to look like an industrial loft space, with white walls, wood and aluminum touches everywhere, and comfy red and black couches and bean bags.

Hannah’s 19 now, and has been working as a part-time mentor at the Loft. When she was younger, she had strict parents, so this place became her refuge. And she spent most of the afternoons of her high school years here.

Wilkinson: I would come in, and there was kids from all different types of cliques, I guess. And they would just come in, and a kid who’s a jock and a kid who’s a, what they call nerd, would just sit and play Xbox together -- people I never would have expected to hang out with. And I think we really had the opportunity to not worry as much about ourselves and kind of be more together. And you really meet people on a much deeper level here.

Guidi: It’s made such a difference for her, she’s invested in helping others have that, too.

William: *I’m one of the biggest nerds you’ll ever find in this town.*

Guidi: This is one of the teenagers who’s a current regular at The Loft. And since he’s only 17, I won’t use his real name. We’ll call him William.

William: Um, yeah, I’ve watched like every Marvel movie that comes out and stuff. They really did help me before I started, was able, had access to this place.

Guidi: Some kids end up at The Loft because their high school teacher, their coach, or Judge Latham himself recommends it. Some have been in the juvenile corrections system. Others, like William, and Hannah before him, are just here because they need a place to hang out. William comes religiously, every weekday, to play video games.

- William: I first started coming here after my eighth grade graduation. So we had a field trip to come down here, and I really liked that they offer computers, Xbox, and then you can just play pool or air hockey. And then every once in a while, they'll throw, like, some kind of event.
- Guidi: After he finished the 8th grade, William dropped out of school. Like Hannah, he also struggles with his parents and with learning in a traditional environment.
- William: This place feels free in a way to me. Most of the time, if you talk to certain people, you feel like you're getting judged or something. But when you talk to them here, they like gave out advice, help you plan for your future, and they just don't immediately jump to one conclusion. They consider multiple.
- Guidi: So he keeps coming to The Loft, and often to talk or to just play video games side-by-side with Hannah. Since mentors are mandatory reporters for things like abuse or illegal behavior, she occupies a kind of middle ground between friend and authority.
- Wilkinson: Some kids will just come up and just start talking and I'm like, just, I just listen and just wait. And then, um, there's a few kids that I'll often ask, like, do you want me to give you advice or do you want me to listen? There's certain things that I have to, like, if there's a life in danger or something illegal going on, I have to report. And so I would have to call dispatch, you know, and get everything sorted out. And I've, I've only had to do that once thankfully, but, um, the kids are still really open with me, even knowing that even if they say something I have to call it in.
- Guidi: Paul Hancock also has a kind of double role — he's director of Juvenile Court Services for Apache County but he also acts as a mentor at The Loft. He takes me on a tour late one morning, before the kids arrive.
- Paul Hancock: This is our education room. And we usually have study time from 2:30-5:00. So we asked them when kids want to study, do homework, research stuff...
- Guidi: We duck into a fully-equipped recording studio, and a music room with a keyboard and electric guitars hanging from the walls that took its inspiration from The Rock, a teen center started by famous heavy rocker Alice Cooper in Phoenix, about a four-hour drive from here.
- And then there's the big open area with the games and sofas...
- Hancock: We started off with one pool table, but it was wildly popular. And the great thing about pool it's like, it's a social game. You can't play pool and not talk to somebody. So we have kids that don't know each other at the high school, but they know each other really well here. So we're kind of breaking through some cliques.
- Guidi: Like clockwork, the kids start showing up alone, or with their crews, as soon as the local high school lets out. They go straight for the pool and ping pong tables. They play together, they sit around, and then they move to the Xbox or the music room. By mid-afternoon and into evening, I see about 10 teenagers lounging around the place. But some nights, The Loft will host two or three times that number. And when they do, Richie is often sitting there at the front desk.
- Richard Gwinn: The kids all know that we all worked for probation and the court, they all know, um, one, it's a small community, but two, we don't hide it from them — we make a point of it.

Guidi: Richard Gwinn, or Richie, is a sheriff's deputy turned mentor.

Gwinn: I mean, my title is investigator. But, I'm a fixer, so I'm also the fleet manager and, uh, the armorer...

Guidi: As an officer for a small rural community like Saint Johns, Richie is in charge of managing cars and weapons— he wears many hats. But he's most proud of being part of The Loft, which he sees in the context of a reform movement.

Gwinn: Well, I'd like to think it's part of a bigger shift. We've had several pushes from the administrative office of courts, you know, we've moved to evidence-based practices. We have tons of studies out there that have talked about recidivism rates and, you know, the other associated issues with incarceration and, and things like that. And I think it has worked; we've had a tremendous reduction in the number of referrals that we've had.

Guidi: To be specific, juvenile arrests in Apache County dropped by 44 percent the year after The Loft opened. Statewide, according to data from the Arizona Department of Juvenile Corrections, the number of juvenile offenders who were in detention fell by 41 percent from 2015 to 2019.

Music transition.

Saint Johns calls itself “The Town of Friendly Neighbors”. It sits on ancestral Apache, Hopi, Diné and Zuni land, which was then occupied by Mexican and Mormon settlers, who established the town in the late 1800s. Today, it has a population of around 3,500 people — more than three quarters white.

It's a mellow community close to the mountains, which makes it an attractive place for families like Judge Latham's.

Latham: My wife's mom grew up in Saint Johns. I worked at a big firm in Phoenix and then one of my friends moved up here first.

Guidi: When Judge Latham, his wife, and young children decided to follow suit, he took a job at the Apache County Attorney's office. And then, he decided to run for judge. On first look, he doesn't fit the stereotype; he looks like a youthful college student and has a friendly, welcoming demeanor. But he had a vision.

Latham: Part of it really was, you know, there were things I felt like needed to happen, and my experience in small counties is a lot of times things are being done the way they're being done, because that's how they've always been done.

Guidi: One of those things — the biggest one — was the local youth detention center, which was heavily underutilized. The 11-bed facility sat empty for sometimes six weeks at a time and was costing a little over \$800,000 a year.

Latham: When you average 1.7 kids a day, those costs just stop making sense. And so, I knew this was a problem, like it was a well-known thing amongst, you know, maintenance people that like, you know, the staff's playing ping pong because there's nobody there.

It just was a systemic problem. Um, you know, in a small county like this, you just don't have the numbers and you don't ever want to make the numbers.

Guidi: Ultimately, fewer kids getting arrested was a good thing. But nearby counties weren't making the numbers either. It still wasn't clear to Judge Latham whether there were just fewer referrals of juveniles by police or whether kids simply weren't getting into trouble as much.

He didn't land on a single answer. But the more he looked into that shift, the more Saint Johns was beginning to look like so many other places across Arizona and across the country.

Latham: So most of the time in juvenile justice, criminal justice is all reactionary. So as a court, as a probation system, you sit back, rely on everybody else to do the programming, and you just hope — and then you just get what you get, right?

Guidi: For years now, psychologists, psychiatrists and sociologists have been studying the impacts of incarceration on young people's development. And they've found that time behind bars can produce long lasting, negative change.

Latham: We realized we're locking kids up that probably shouldn't be locked up. Because, my view is, if you have that 16 year old that didn't really do anything and maybe was the one kind of getting harassed by mom's boyfriend, right? And the solution was to arrest that kid and bring them to detention... So if they actually book them, then that kid's going to be strip-searched, that kid's going to be put into a striped jumpsuit, he's gonna be put into the flip flops. And if you want to talk about psychological damage to a kid, that's how you do it. If you want to send the message to the kid that the system doesn't care about you, and you're just a number, that's how you do it.

Guidi: So here's what Judge Latham proposed: a drop-in teen center that would be funded through the county court system, at almost a third of the cost of the juvenile facility.

Their new approach would be "proactive engagement" — bringing in local youth with community projects and leisure activities. The Loft would partner with the local high school and coaches, as well as the police and sheriff's departments, to identify teenagers in need of mentorship or after-school activities.

If police arrested a local kid who committed a serious felony such as first or second degree murder or armed robbery, the county would need to send them to a regional juvenile facility a good four hours away.

But more often than not, police might end up bringing a kid to The Loft, without charges. It's a reversal of the old "tough on juvenile crime" philosophy left over from decades past.

Music transition.

In the '80s, American cities faced growing rates of both adult and juvenile violence. Between 1980 and 1994, youth arrests for offenses like murder, forcible rape, robbery and aggravated assault rose by 64 percent. This is what's commonly referred to now as the Superpredator Era.

John Dilulio: A superpredator is a young juvenile criminal who is so impulsive, so remorseless, that he can kill, rape, maim, without giving it a second thought.

Guidi: That's Princeton University political science professor John Dilulio, featured in a Retro

Report/New York Times documentary.

He coined the term in the 90s, predicting that the number of juveniles in U.S. custody would increase exponentially into the next two decades. Pundits and politicians on both sides of the aisle picked up the term, and it was used to justify tough-on-crime legislation. Later, Dilulio would go on to publicly regret his Superpredator predictions, which were heavily weighted toward young Black and brown men in the so-called inner city.

By the year 2000, there were more than 100-thousand young people in custody in the U.S.

That's around the time when Victor Chavez began working for the corrections system in Arizona.

Victor Chavez: I was working as a supervisor in the detention center in Holbrook for Navajo county.

Guidi: The job was difficult, but the thing he loved the most was helping newly-released offenders as they got out of prison.

Chavez: I mean, a lot of it's positive when you get those success stories and people that are successful on probation and go on to have successful lives after that. That's great, but there's so much negative aspects about it. And then when you have to like revoke them, then they end up having to go to prison and stuff like that, you see how it affects having a family.... Sometimes that gets to you and, you know, and it does, to me, it's, as I get older, it's just, I just have more empathy for people and their families.

Guidi: Victor had a family of his own, and he was eager for something different. In 2017, he heard from his former coworker Paul Hancock.

Chavez: And he was like, Victor, we're going to do something. Hopefully it's going to be really awesome. And I'd like you to come be a part of it.

Guidi: Paul told Victor how the Apache County juvenile detention center, located about an hour from where he worked in Navajo County, was closing down. How the new judge had a different idea for how to use the space — one that was inspired by more prevention and mentorship.

Chavez: So then he started telling me about the place and the vision and everything else, and, uh, I got to meet Judge Latham and then I was like, *oh man, I totally want to be a part of this place*. I've always been a fan of like a mentorship programs and things like that, positive things for juveniles and kids to try to maybe deflect the trajectory they're on now in life and maybe in more of a positive direction.

Now, if a kid was acting out, arresting them wasn't the only option — police could take them to the Loft, where they might end up in one of its so-called respite rooms. Judge Latham himself showed me one of them.

Latham: So if a kid comes into respite, they'll bring them to the front door, just like anybody.

Guidi: Respite is like, he really needs to, someone needs to mediate?

Latham: The respite is what I consider, they just need a safe place to stay. Or, you know, we've had times where the officer's on patrol at 2:00 AM and they've got a kid sleeping at the park and it's because mom and dad kicked him out... Well, we gotta give them the option, like,

it's not safe for you to stay here, it's 2:00 AM. So they can call us and, we can say, yeah, bring him.

So this used to be a single bed cell, but now you can see, when a kid comes in here, the vibe and the view they're going to have is not like, *oh, I'm under arrest*. Like this is nicer than my kid's room.

Guidi: The two respite rooms are old jail cells, 8 by 10 feet, but they've been transformed; they have windows, nice beds with comforters and pictures on the white-painted walls. A kid will stay in a respite room overnight, during which Victor, Richie, or another mentor, will chat with them and connect them with social services, if needed.

The last time a kid came with a police referral was two months before I visited; he ended up being taken to the regional juvenile facility in Pinal County. On most days though, The Loft fills up only with kids who come to socialize, do homework, play games or escape whatever challenges they may face at home.

Music transition.

This kind of approach is spreading as state authorities are also making changes...

Joseph Kelroy: *So, we know there's a small percentage of the population that, you know, does harm, does cause continued delinquency, will run away. But it's a small percentage. It's not the majority.*

Guidi: This is Joseph Kelroy, director of the Juvenile Justice Services Division at the Arizona Supreme Court.

Kelroy: What Arizona did is they created a detention hearing the next day. So if, if it was on a Friday, they had Saturday detention hearing so that, you know, kids didn't sit excessively in a detention center. And we know that with trauma, brain development, those types of things we, we can do more harm by placing a kid even for a night in a detention center..

Guidi: The state also standardized a detention screening tool, a rubric that would holistically determine whether a juvenile should even be put in detention to begin with.

Kelroy: If a judge, or a probation officer or somebody, gets upset with a kid, and the response is detention, the tool kind of re-guided them and said, no, this kid really isn't a public risk. He's gonna show back up to court. He probably won't commit new offenses, and you can do some alternative — either return them home with some conditions, or look at another family member or adult that the parents approve of to avoid that... it doesn't have to be a location. It can be, you know, a combination of various factors to help keep a kid connected to their schools and communities so that you're not disrupting that.

Latham: I think what's driving a lot of the change is a lot of this evidence-based practices and data...

Guidi: Here's Judge Latham again.

Latham: So what we've learned, if you look at the old model, the old model was sort of spare the stick, spoil the child. So that's sort of how we viewed it, as, if you punish a kid enough, then they'll learn to correct the behavior. But the premise of that argument is assuming that these kids have good family lives. The truth is that's not what we deal with.

Guidi: That shift in perspective — that most kids need support and love, rather than punishment — is slowly permeating the corrections system in small communities like Saint Johns, in Arizona overall, and in other states too.

In September 2020, California became the first state to announce it would be dismantling its Division of Juvenile Justice, or DJJ, after years of scandals. By July 2023, its three remaining state facilities will close their doors and transfer juvenile detention to counties. In its stead, California plans to launch a new Office of Youth and Community Restoration, focused on rehabilitation and community reintegration. And, a group of 57 youth correctional administrators from all over the country, known as the Youth Correctional Leaders for Justice, have made a radical recommendation: close down youth prisons, once and for all.

Guidi: I've come to Saint Johns' high school graduation, where 66 local kids will be getting their diplomas. Paul Hancock tells me about a half of them have come through The Loft. This is the first high school class that has had The Loft as a resource since the very beginning of freshman year.

We're backstage with Paul, Victor, and William, the teenager who loves the Xbox. Today, he's being trained to shoot video of the ceremony and to stream it online for people back home. But, before it all starts, Paul and Victor are trying to convince him to go back to school — like they do just about any chance they get.

Audio of Paul and Victor talking to William.

William looks shyly at the ground — he's not answering. But as long as he continues to come into The Loft — and he can keep doing this while he's still a minor — Paul and Victor will keep encouraging him to try sports, or video, or music, whatever works.

After all the graduates' names are called, and they throw their caps in the air, William checks in with Victor. He's good to go home. Over all the noise and the cheers, I can hear William and his mentors saying to one another, "See you on Monday, at The Loft."

Celebration by Kool & The Gang plays in the background.

Miller: Thanks to Ruxandra Guidi for that story.

This fall, Apache County plans to open the doors to its second teen center, The Lodge, about a half hour away from The Loft.

As for William, he is currently planning to return to school, and is working on an individual education plan with a high school counselor.

Uplifting music transition.

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Outro music.

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