



## ***The Kid Angle***

*Kid-focused news from First Focus on Children*

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**Pandemic opportunities — and missteps — in child welfare and youth justice**  
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*Contact: Michele Kayal, VP Media and Communications,  
[MicheleK@FirstFocus.org](mailto:MicheleK@FirstFocus.org)*

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The COVID-19 pandemic offered golden opportunities — and inflicted new missteps — on the country’s child welfare and youth justice systems, experts and advocates said during this week’s installment of [First Focus on Children’s Kids & COVID Conversation Series](#).

With no option for social distancing in congregate care facilities experts engaged in “creative thinking,” said **Jennifer Rodriguez, executive director of the Youth Law Center**, and began evaluating alternatives to detention and institutional settings. Fewer children were admitted to these centers, more were placed in the community, and many were released.

“There’s something very hopeful in the fact that when an emergency hit the system, we didn’t need to lock up as many kids,” said **Joshua Rovner, senior advocacy associate at The Sentencing Project**.

But inside the youth justice system, conditions grew worse: Infected children were isolated in solitary confinement; staffing shortages curtailed access to food, care and monitoring; the end of parental, educational and other visits further isolated these children. Racial and ethnic disparities grew as bias influenced who was released and who was kept behind.

“What became crystal clear if it wasn’t already is that these places are not places for children to grow up,” said Rodriguez, who characterized the failure to

learn from the successes of the children who were outplaced as a “missed opportunity.”

The panel urged policy makers to preserve and integrate innovations in both the child welfare and youth justice systems that delivered positive results, including:

- **Virtual hearings:** While not appropriate in all cases, virtual hearings allowed children and parents to participate in their cases remotely. “Virtual hearings have their place and may be an innovation that helps court rooms be more accessible,” said **Allison Green, legal director at the National Association of Counsel for Children.**
- **Access to devices for children in extended foster care:** Traditionally treated as contraband, during the pandemic devices to access the internet were seen as a gateway to family, connections, education, visits with social workers, and court proceedings.
- **Detention as a “step of last resort:”** In Maryland, for example, court officials issued guidance that created a 40% drop in overall commitment and detention of youth. The guidance discouraged detention unless the child posed a threat to public safety.

“To the extent that we can keep that same mindset, I think that’s going to be the challenge of the movement,” said **James Dold, founder of Human Rights for Kids.**

Other panelists included **Shereen White, director of advocacy and policy at Children’s Rights, Tony Parsons, federal policy specialist at Youth Villages,** and **First Focus on Children’s senior director for child welfare and youth justice Aubrey Edwards-Luce.**

To view the full conversation, [visit this link.](#)

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