

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 18, 2024

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro  
Comptroller General  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, N.W., Room 7100, Washington, DC 20548

Dear Comptroller General Dodaro:

I write to you to request information about the state of federal oversight of juvenile detention facilities across the country.

According to federal data, in 2019 about 36,000 juveniles were confined in more than 1,500 juvenile residential placement facilities across the United States.<sup>1</sup> State and local governments have a responsibility to ensure the safety and well-being of juveniles in such facilities, however, the federal government also plays an important role. For example, the Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention works with states and territories to ensure their compliance with the Prison Rape Elimination Act and to protect youth in juvenile facilities.

In Georgia, juveniles who have been charged with or who committed a serious offense are placed in state custody at either Regional Youth Detention Centers (RYDCs) or Youth Development Campuses (YDCs). Across Georgia's seven YDCs, data from Georgia's Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) show that, between 2015 and 2018, 3,400 youths in custody were physically assaulted and over 150 were sexually assaulted by other juvenile detainees.<sup>2</sup> In the same period, DJJ investigated 1,600 misconduct allegations against correctional officers in YDCs.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in one YDC alone, over 2,000 episodes of self-harm were documented.<sup>4</sup> In 2022, incidents like these culminated in the deaths of three children in DJJ custody. According to news reports, one of the youths died after a correctional officer allowed a fight game in his presence.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, *National Report Series Bulletin: Juveniles in Residential Placement, 2019* (Washington, D.C.: April 2022). Juvenile residential placement facilities refers to public and private juvenile facilities that hold juvenile delinquents and/or other juveniles determined by a court to need supervision, services or care (status offenders).

<sup>2</sup> Alan Judd, *Deadly Consequences: Murder Case Exposes a System's failings*, ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION (Nov. 10, 2019), <https://www.ajc.com/news/crime--law/deadly-consequences/kZuVlFOFT4hiUNxFZ83sKK/>.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> Katherine Landergan, *Three Die in Juvenile Custody in Georgia in Recent Weeks*, ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION (Sept. 23, 2022), <https://www.ajc.com/news/atlanta-news/three-children-die-in-juvenile-custody-in-georgia-in-recent-weeks/7KCWT3YLT5A67MZTBHK46YZVQI/>.

Georgia's youth detention centers are also severely understaffed, creating dangerous conditions for the detainees as well as correctional officers and staff.<sup>6</sup>

Dangerous conditions at youth detention facilities are not limited to Georgia. A 2022 New York Times investigation highlighted allegations of gross mistreatment of youth in a state-operated juvenile detention facility in Louisiana, including numerous instances of physical abuse and sexual assault occurring over a 25-year period.<sup>7</sup> The article described correctional officers allegedly using chokeholds against youth as young as 13 years old, using food or telephone privileges to coerce youth into sexual favors, and ignoring suicidal statements made by youth confined in this facility.<sup>8</sup> In 2019, two juveniles reportedly died by suicide at this facility within a three-day timespan.<sup>9</sup> Further, the article described inadequate and superficial oversight of the facility by local, state and federal authorities, which allowed for this abuse to go largely unchecked for more than two decades.<sup>10</sup>

To better understand the federal government's oversight of such facilities, I request that GAO examine:

1. Department of Justice oversight mechanisms designed to ensure the safety and well-being of children in state, local and private juvenile facilities;
2. The extent to which these oversight mechanisms were properly implemented in selected facilities;
3. The circumstances surrounding instances where youth have been mistreated in juvenile facilities nationwide, if oversight mechanisms identified such mistreatment, and what, if any, corrective actions were taken as a result of oversight; and
4. The primary challenges faced by juvenile facilities nationwide that put juvenile detainees at risk of abuse, neglect, or other harms.

Please provide our offices with regular updates as to developments in your work. Should you have any questions about this request, please contact Sara Schaumburg, Chief Counsel to Chair Jon Ossoff, U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law, at (202) 329-1349 or [sara\\_schaumburg@ossoff.senate.gov](mailto:sara_schaumburg@ossoff.senate.gov).

Thank you for your assistance in this matter.

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<sup>6</sup> Drew Favakeh, *Investigation Reveals Misconduct, Security Lapses at Savannah Regional Youth Detention Center*, SAVANNAH MORNING NEWS (Nov. 30, 2023, 6:05 AM), <https://www.savannahnow.com/story/news/crime/2023/11/30/misconduct-security-lapses-at-savannah-regional-youth-detention-center/71647129007/>.

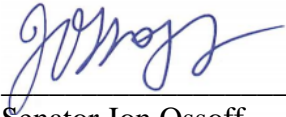
<sup>7</sup> Megan Shutzer and Rachel Lauren Mueller, *'Dying Inside': Chaos and Cruelty in Louisiana Juvenile Detention*, N.Y. TIMES (Oct. 30, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/10/29/us/juvenile-detention-abuses-louisiana.html>.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jon Ossoff", written over a horizontal line.

Senator Jon Ossoff

Chairman

U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law