

The “Becca Bill” 20 Years Later: How Washington’s Truancy Laws Negatively Impact Children

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Becca is a girl’s name many of us know because of the “Becca bill,” a piece of legislation in Washington State named for a young girl who was murdered. Twenty years after her death, the law that was passed in Becca’s name has incarcerated thousands of children who were never found guilty of any crime. The Becca laws have made Washington State the country’s foremost jailer of children for “status offenses” like skipping school, coming home after curfew, and not doing their homework or household chores. The Becca bill was passed in the wake of a terrible and tragic murder, and passed with good intentions to keep kids like Becca—who was known as Misty among her friends on the street—safe. But intentions are complicated, and the best intentions sometimes lead to the cruelest results.

Now we can see the effects.

The law now allows parents to use legal petitions called ARY (At Risk Youth) to obtain court orders that require children to participate in social services, to attend school, and to obey their guardians. Kids who disobey these court orders can be found in contempt and jailed. In a single year, Washington State judges ordered young “status offenders” into juvenile detention [a total of 2,705 times](#). The only state that came close to that number is Kentucky, with less than half as many orders. These orders have not done what they were intended to do. In some cases, they have become a tool for parents to control their children through the courts, by adding jail time to the list of potential punishment.

[No statistical correlation has been found](#) between ARY petitions and high school enrollment. This is because poverty—not insufficient parental authority—is the primary cause of truancy. Poverty imposes on children all the dynamics and consequences of material and emotional deprivation. Ned Lauver, an associate school principal [writing in *Educational Leadership*](#), finds a very strong correlation between poverty and chronic absence: “Poverty and school absence or truancy often feed each other. The conditions that students living in poverty face (poor nutrition, lack of access to health care, even a lack of gas in the car at month’s end so that a child who misses the bus can’t catch a ride) exacerbate poor attendance.”

The Becca law also makes things much harder for children who are already laboring under social stigma and racism. [According to the Washington State Institute for Public Policy](#), children under Becca orders are disproportionately poor, and also disproportionately from groups the state calls racial or ethnic minorities.

When folks talk about the “school-to-prison pipeline,” this is precisely the mechanism they are talking about. Children who are read as white, who are outwardly compliant, whose families have resources, and who can keep their teenage rebellions behind closed suburban doors are treated very differently than children who do not have these options.

That leads to the state-imposed criminalization of certain children. These children are not just chided, corrected, or lectured for their behavior. They end up in jail, dramatically increasing their chances of entering the adult criminal system and exacerbating the deep-rooted inequities in the Washington State prison system—and the racial disproportions of the U.S. carceral system as a whole.

As momentum builds nationwide toward creating less punitive juvenile justice systems, it is time to examine our truancy laws. We should not be jailing young people— instead, we should work to understand the underlying causes of their behaviors. This will allow us to develop the tools and resources kids will need to thrive at home, in their schools, and in their communities.