***The hammer falls: Supervisors vote to shut down San Francisco’s juvenile detention center.***

The San Francisco Board of Supervisors has made it official: San Francisco will close the City’s only juvenile detention center by the end of 2021. The shutdown measure passed on June 4th by a resounding 10-1 vote of the City’s legislative body. Between now and 2021, plans will be developed to move the small residual population of detained youth (presently 34) to non-secure facilities within the City or, as needed, to juvenile halls (secure lockups) in other counties.

The problems that triggered San Francisco’s response are epidemic among juvenile detention centers throughout the state. California’s 49 county-operated “juvenile halls” are running at just 30 percent of total statewide capacity, due mainly to the steep and persistent decline in juvenile arrests. County budgets must support the on-going cost to keep partly-full or nearly-empty detention centers open. A recent (April 2019) study conducted by the Chief Probation Officers of California documented per-capita juvenile detention costs as high as $500,000 per youth per year for some counties. The cost in San Francisco was running at $13 million annually year to detain an average of about 40 juveniles per day in the 150 bed facility

Cost was not the only driver of the San Francisco shutdown vote. Supervisors sponsoring the measure in March 2019 questioned the fundamental need for secure juvenile detention, citing harm done by locking kids up away from home, school and community and the over-incarceration of youth-of-color. Community advocates offered vocal support for shutdown in public hearings. But not everyone is happy with the closure plan. The City’s Mayor, London Breed, sided against the measure and convened a Working Group to come up with a slimmed-down facility that could manage a small number of juveniles needing secure custody as a matter of law or public safety. Allen Nance, the City’s Chief Juvenile Probation Officer, joined others in noting that full closure would push some San Francisco youth to lockups in other counties, far away from home, and that the City would also sacrifice its present capacity to triage, house and serve arrested youth with mental health disorders. There were also divided views among African-American leaders. Reverend Amos Brown, president of the local NAACP Branch, asked “If we close down juvenile hall, where will violent or sex offenders and others with mental health issues go? We should tweak the facility and amend it, not end it”.

But ”ending it” is now the official position of San Francisco’s Board of Supervisors, whose 10-1 vote to close the juvenile hall appears, whatever the Mayor’s views, to be solidly veto-proof.

For a wider and well-documented investigation of the “empty beds” syndrome affecting California’s vast juvenile detention network, I highly recommend the recent San Francisco Chronicle series on “Vanishing Violence”, accessible on the web <https://projects.sfchronicle.com/2019/vanishing-violence/>