




# Proper Furnishings for Juvenile Justice Facilities



**Research indicates that the environment in which juveniles serve time can have a strong emotional impact on youth offenders and influence rates of recidivism.**

## Introduction

When you think about the typical teenager's bedroom, the images that come to mind might include posters and artwork; brightly colored covers, sheets and curtains; a funky light fixture on a desk; and perhaps sports equipment or a musical instrument in the corner. And if your teenager is lucky, there is only one bed, giving them the privacy they need and want at appropriate times.

After all, the bedrooms of young females and males should reflect their interests, the world they live in and current popular culture trends. Expressing one's personality in such ways lets kids be kids and allows for self-expression, which can help them become happy and well-adjusted young adults.

Now, in stark contrast, imagine a juvenile detention facility where youth may be confined in large, gray, monochromatic rooms, with little access to natural light or any of the features that you would find in a residential home.

No light. No color. No privacy. No way to express themselves. No way for a kid to just be a kid and thrive.



Granted, many will argue that actual incarceration is only part of the punishment for inmates, and that serving “hard time” in a tough facility will hopefully be an additional incentive for offenders to not break the law again. And managing juvenile offenders presents unique challenges to facilities in that they tend to be more volatile and prone to vandalism. They are young and still developing emotionally and may act in selfish and impulsive ways.

But is it possible that the philosophy behind harsh corrections has the opposite effect that is intended, and that young, impressionable youth who are still developing mentally can suffer severe trauma from their environment and are more likely to offend again if imprisoned in such facilities?

No one is suggesting that juvenile correctional facilities should mirror teenage bedrooms, with their residential furniture and pop icons plastered across the walls. There are safety concerns to consider when taking that large of a leap. But there is debate that is happening across the United States among correctional officials, members of law enforcement, politicians and your average taxpayer, among others, regarding the spaces in which juveniles serve their time.

One side of the debate feels that humanized correctional facilities can help rehabilitate juvenile inmates and break the cycle of crime early in an offender's life. Others see incarceration from a traditional point of view, and believe that prisons and jails should serve as centers of punishment, and that making facilities more residential is merely a luxury that inmates should not be afforded.

But what about correctional staff and their mental health and well-being? Would working in a facility with natural light, color and access to nature make them more content and productive? And if these attributes balanced the equilibrium and calmed inmates, could that potentially keep correctional staff safer, which could lead to less conflict in facilities and decrease job burnout?

Both sides of the debate have their valid points. But with the United States currently leading the world in the number of people incarcerated, decision makers are looking at evidence based research for ways to help rehabilitate those who do offend in an attempt to reduce recidivism. And one of the measures that is slowly gaining traction is the humanization of correctional facilities.

In this white paper, we will present detailed information on the current state of juvenile incarceration and the emerging trend in humanizing correctional facilities, along with evidence that shows just how important environment is to those who spend time in these spaces. Lastly, we will provide resources on what to look for when selecting furniture products that will help in humanizing juvenile correctional facilities, while also keep those who use them safe from harm.

## The Trend of Humanizing Correctional Environments

Advocates for prison normalization say that lower rates of recidivism and less inmate violence likely can be two of the positive outcomes when this shift is put into action. They point to the fact that high incarceration rates are proving too costly for American society. Correctional facility operating budgets are in some cases in the tens of millions of dollars and our communities continue to pay long after inmates serve their sentence through social services and other programming.

Additionally, inmates that are released ill-equipped for reintegration often do harm in the community and often find themselves back in jail in what seems to be an endless cycle. Lastly, prisons are often violent places and inmates are often released as damaged – or even more damaged – than before they entered the facility. All of this creates a sizeable subculture of broken people.

So before we discuss how to humanize juvenile justice facilities, it's important to understand the concept of humanizing correctional facilities in general, and how this trend is becoming more prominent in the United States, and how it can help combat the challenges facing inmates and our correctional facilities.

While these models may not always be appropriate for high risk inmates, research indicates success with nonviolent offenders and offers promising support for approaches that may prevent offenders from becoming career criminals. Some of the most encouraging approaches shift the focus from punishment to rehabilitation.



High rates of recidivism seem to indicate that a system based on punishment may do less to deter criminals than it does to perpetuate illicit behavior. A system based on rehabilitation may better prepare the inmate for reintegration once their debt to society is paid. Additionally, it is well documented that a significant percentage of inmates throughout the country suffer from mental illness, and that less violence and more stabilization in their environment can lead to better results while they are incarcerated and after they are released.

It's also worth noting that juvenile offenders may see the greatest results from the humanizing of correctional facilities. If the facilities they are housed in become more normalized and concentrate on rehabilitation, then it might be possible to turn would-be life criminals into functioning members of society at an early age – preventing what might be an endless cycle of crime and incarceration for some individuals.

So what does it look like exactly? This new trend of humanization uses color and furniture that are residential in appearance, replacing steel and metal beds and chairs that have usually come in stark grays and are highly institutional. Artwork appears on the walls as a way to provide an interesting visual distraction, opposed to a slab of concrete.

Landscaping has, in some cases, become an important visual element on the grounds outside of the facility and presents an opportunity for the therapeutic experience of gardening. And last, but definitely not least, technology – video visitation, mp3 players and computers – is increasingly becoming an integral part of some youth's daily lives, giving them access to information and a connection to the outside world.

Many European correctional facilities have adopted this approach and offer some of the most dramatic examples of humanization. These facilities favor green space, normalized furnishings and natural light as well as more striking differences like limited supervision, no barriers such as fences between the inmate and the outside world and inmate activities that would mirror those of the average citizen. Again, these approaches are not appropriate for all security levels, but there are promising results emerging from systems that more narrowly define their population and customize the environments to manage those segments with the intention of producing results to the mutual benefit of the inmate, staff and even society as whole. What are some of these results? Let's recap.



- Research points to a reduction in recidivism
- Humanized facilities have a positive effect on the mentally ill
- Facilities may see a decrease in inmate violence
- Both inmates and staff will feel more relaxed, leading to a decrease in tension
- Inmates feel a broader connection to the outside world instead of a limited environment
- They will be more prepared to re-enter society as mentally healthy and adjusted individuals
- Facilities may be able to retain correctional officers and keep them more satisfied and secure

Correctional facilities in the U.S. haven't been completely barren of opportunities for prisoners to improve their lives while they are incarcerated and once they are released. Opportunities to get GEDs, job skills and mental health services are common place in many facilities. However, the normalization of the actual environment is a relatively new concept and one that is slowly being explored in this country.

“One of the things you learn very quickly in design is that people do respond to their environment. In the corrections environment, the more relaxed we can make the inmate, the more comfortable the inmate becomes, or the more conducive the environment becomes to their responsiveness to the systems, the better it is for staff as well,” Paul T. Chastant II, AIA NCARB, Senior Project Manager at HDR Architecture said. “And environment is a big key. Staff has to be comfortable. A lot of times they will be locked into a room with 64 people that have had histories of doing a crime. They have to feel comfortable. And environment drives that comfort. If an inmate is relaxed and able to communicate with staff, then staff relaxes and helps facilitate and give to the inmate.”



## Juvenile Detention – The Numbers and the Trauma

If there is a silver lining to juvenile crime in this country it is that in 2000 there were 108,802 juveniles in some kind of detention or residential placement center. By 2014 that number dropped to 50,821, according to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. That's a tremendous decrease in such a short time.

According to a Justice Policy Institute article, Jake Horowitz, state policy director for Pew's Public Safety Performance Project, said the decrease in juvenile incarceration occurred for two reasons: "For one, the drop in juvenile violent crime arrests almost matches the drop in juvenile commitments. Secondly, state policymakers are increasingly interested in reforming their juvenile justice system to prioritize alternative forms of punishment over incarceration or commitment to residential facilities," according to the article.

While the drop is promising and shows that action is being taken to reduce juvenile detention, correctional facilities are still responsible for the incarceration and programming of more than 50,000 juveniles. And according to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, more than four percent of all facilities were overcrowded in 2014, which taxes staff and facilities that have the incredible task of handling those who have committed crimes and may be suffering from mental illness.

But numbers aside, there is one data point that can't easily be measured: the extent of the mental instability caused by trauma. According to an Academy of Architecture for Justice Journal article written by juvenile justice planner Bobbie Huskey, MSW, head of Huskey & Associates Consulting, entitled "Trauma Informed Juvenile Facilities: The Next Generation of Residential Care," trauma is defined as:

- "A disorder resulting from sexual abuse, physical abuse, traumatic brain injury, bipolar disorder, depression, fear, anger, rage, aggression, anxiety, and witnessing violence (Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Disorders V)."
- "Results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual wellbeing (U.S. Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration)."

Shockingly, the article goes on to report that:

- 90 percent of detained youth experiences one or more traumas in their life. Some acts of trauma include sexual abuse, abandonment and witnessing violence at home.
- 58 percent went through six or more traumatic events.
- 93 percent had at least one psychiatric disorder.
- 11 percent had a clinical diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder.

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The article also states that the brains of young people can be positively or negatively altered if confined in a correctional facility or residential environment depending on the conditions.

***"The size of juvenile centers and housing units has steadily downsized. Youth and staff are traumatized by large facilities, there are more incidents and assaults in large facilities, and it is difficult for staff to manage large groups of delinquents," Huskey, a practitioner with more than 30 years of experience working in juvenile and adult corrections, said in an interview for this white paper. "Design has moved from a jail-like design to a more normalized design. The research on the negative impact of harsh confinement has driven practitioners, facility planners and designers to create a restorative and rehabilitative physical environment that reduces trauma and supports rehabilitation."***



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According to the AIA Journal article, John Eberhard, founding member of the Academy of Neuroscience For Architecture and now Board Member Emeritus, has spearheaded research that shows how a child’s environment can influence behavior. The article states, verbatim, that Eberhard’s work indicates that:

- “The child’s retinal area of the visual cortex is influenced positively by natural daylight with an observed sense of wellbeing.”
- “Eberhard found that ambient noise levels in excess of 60 decibels increase cortical levels, thus leading to increased levels of stress among youth and staff in a residential facility.”
- “Isolation, sensory deprivation, and solitary confinement deprive the child from stimulation and human contact, resulting in hallucinations that trigger the amygdala and induces anger and aggression.”

Huskey also points to the work of Dr. Richard Wener, Professor of Environmental Psychology in the Department of Technology, Culture and Society at the Polytechnic Institute of New York University, who says crowding, lack of natural light, excessive noise, lack of privacy and isolation are all considered correctional environment stressors that can cause trauma in individuals.

“These conditions of confinement lead to overwhelming feelings of sadness and depression, paranoia, fear of people and deterioration both cognitively and emotionally leading to selfmutilation,” the article states.

The article’s answer to these challenges? Create trauma-free correctional environments that are humanized and have a positive effect on the emotional wellbeing of staff and youth.

## Furniture and Design Considerations for Juvenile Justice Centers

So we have explained why humanizing juvenile facilities is important. Now let’s get to the how.

“A juvenile facility should provide child-appropriate programming and a physical environment, including the furnishings, because youth with high degrees of trauma disorders, emotional disorders, and addictive disorders are severely impaired and require a safe and positive environment to get better,” Huskey said. “In fact, the juvenile facility should be a learning lab where youth feel safe and supported so they can learn academic, social and emotional skills.”

To make appropriate choices for juvenile detention centers, Huskey says that facilities should protect the safety, health and well-being of the youth that is served and the staff that works in them.

“Furnishings should support the operational goal of the juvenile center which is to provide a safe, nurturing and positive physical environment that minimizes trauma, and that supports a healing environment within which rehabilitation and restoration will be achieved,” she said. “Juvenile centers should be designed to appear comfortable, therapeutic, attractive and non-institutional. The materials should provide comfort, warmth and durability and convey a softer, non-institutional appearance.”

### **In regards to furniture selections, Huskey recommends the following design values:**

- Child-appropriate – As much as possible, furniture should have a positive sensory appeal to youth inmates.
- Suicide-resistant – Furniture should have rounded edges, sloped tops and concealed joinery.
- Residential – With safety in mind, furniture should be as normalized as possible.





- Natural wood-grain laminates – This option softens the look of furniture while maintaining its durability.
- Attractive – Institutional furniture may have a negative impact on the mental wellbeing of inmates.
- Durable – Regardless of the security level, furniture in correctional facilities take a lot of abuse.
- Low maintenance – Products should be easy to clean, fluid resistant and come with few moving parts.

**For high-custody classifications, recommended examples of furnishings include:**

- Fixed, natural wood-grain laminate tables and chairs for table games.
- Rounded edges and concealed joinery for ligature-resistant construction.
- All-steel construction platform bed with natural wood grain, child-friendly, floor level single bed in single occupancy and in double occupancy sleeping room (no bunk beds due to potential suicide risk).
- Bed should have open storage underneath and no area to hide underneath the bed.

**For minimum-medium custody classifications, recommended examples of furnishings include:**

Heavy, natural wood-grain sofas and lounging chairs covered with upholstery tops commonly used in correctional settings.

Heavy, natural wood-grain laminate tables and chairs for table games.

Homelike all-wood, durable, heavy, child-friendly, floor level single bed in single and in double occupancy rooms (no bunk beds due to potential ligature risk). Beds should have rounded edges and concealed joinery for suicide-resistant construction.

Bed should have storage drawers underneath.

**Other recommendations from Huskey include:**

- Rocking chairs that permit youth with attention deficit disorders to keep moving while seated to promote focused concentration should be available in the living room of each living unit.
- Calming room equipped with a large bean bag or with a natural wood-grain sofa and lounging chair covered with upholstery top.
- A privacy wall between the bed and the toilet and lavatory.
- Solid core wood doors on the sleeping room doors.
- Group therapy rooms: Include natural wood-grain laminate, upholstered sofas and lounge chairs, end tables and coffee table.
- Interview and meeting rooms: Include natural wood-grain laminate tables and chairs.
- Classrooms: Include maple top student desks with box for computer/books.
- Carpet in the living rooms, calming rooms, sleeping rooms, isolation rooms, staff stations, staff offices, group therapy rooms, interview rooms and conference rooms.
- Walls painted with a variety of colors to enhance sensory stimulation and calm.





## Rotomolded Products

Additionally, Norix Furniture recommends rotationally molded polymer furniture. Rotomolding is the process of creating one-piece products with no seams or crevices. The process has been around for decades and is used to make kayaks, playground equipment, storage containers and many other items.

While steel or metal furniture historically has been the choice for correctional facilities, the past couple of decades have seen an increase in the use of rotomolded products due to technological advances in this process. Benefits of rotomolded furniture include:

- This furniture is highly durable, structurally robust, dent resistant and cannot rust.
- Products can be manufactured with specially formulated, fire-retardant, high-impact materials that are compliant with industry flammability standards.
- The polymer materials and the one-piece production used in rotomold allow furniture to be manufactured seamlessly and with smooth surfaces. Due to one-piece construction, there are no cracks and crevices where debris and fluids can gather.
- Premium rotomold materials also can be chemically resistant to body oils and fluids, salt solution and cleaning solutions – adding years to the life of the furniture.
- The rotomold process can eliminate what would normally be rectilinear shapes and replaces them with smooth contoured surfaces. This creates an element of safety for those using the product and guards against sharp edges in challenging environments.
- Rotomolded products come in a variety of shapes and sizes, and can include chairs, tables, bed, shelves and almost all other furniture types. Additionally, some manufacturers of these products add aesthetic touches to the furniture, making them more humanized and appealing to all who use them.



## Montgomery County

So what do one of these facilities look like exactly? The Montgomery County Center for Adolescent Services in New Lebanon, OH is a shining example of what correctional facilities can do to humanize their environments. Multiple common areas in this environment are filled with Norix Furniture’s Hondo Nuevo Series – a line of products that includes chair, bench and wedge options that are made of thick vinyl skin and 3 lb. density polyurethane foam. That’s probably not the material you think of when you imagine correctional furniture.

What makes the room really pop are the colors the facility chose from the Norix Naturals and High Brights Color Palette. The hues in these collections are inspired by nature and are designed to normalize what have historically been institutional environments.



Colors called Canyon, Wild Berry and Lagoon make the furniture stand out and appear youthful in appearance. Additionally, murals matching the furniture cover the walls, and doors and other room features are painted lavender and purple, among other colors. The facility has an elementary or middle school quality to it, at least in appearance, and is far cry from the monochromatic spaces you find in many correctional facilities.

The spaces feel therapeutic, safe and inviting. And other items such as rugs and bookshelves make the facility look like a center of rehabilitation, not solely punishment – a theme that is a guiding principal in this new trend in correctional design.



## Maple Street Correctional Center (MSCC) in Redwood City, Calif

Although not a juvenile facility, the Maple Street Correctional Center in Redwood City, Calif is another example of a humanized correctional facility. This 257,000-square-foot, \$165 million facility was completed this year and features “sizable space for inmate programs, natural light and ventilation, artwork, top-notch staff amenities and significant sustainability features,” according to Correctional News.

The article states that the 576-bed facility is trying to achieve LEED Gold certification and is delivering “an innovative approach to how inmates can serve out their sentences while bettering themselves through programs, which could ultimately help to reduce recidivism.”

***“We felt their only function was to warehouse the inmates. After the visits, the sheriff and administrators wanted to do something different. They wanted to bring in the life, the different programs and make this very different from the rest of the jails. So that is how we started.”***

According to the article, architects and jail officials visited correctional facilities around the country to learn about “best practices,”

“The one thing we took away was that many of the jails we visited were very dark and very depressing to inmates and staff operating the jail,” Sam Lin, senior capital project manager at the San Mateo County Sheriff’s Office, said in the article. “We felt their only function was to warehouse the inmates. After the visits, the sheriff and administrators wanted to do something different. They wanted to bring in the life, the different programs and make this very different from the rest of the jails. So that is how we started.”

The facility design and programming may seem radical to some. The facility features ping pong tables, program rooms with large screen TVs and surround sound, housing units with names such as Ocean, Bay, Valley, Aspen and Laurel, and dayrooms with enlarge photos of trees, among many other humanizing features.

“We did not use our typical colors,” Lt. David Titus, project director with the San Mateo County Sheriff’s Office, said in the article. “We used colors that are shown to reduce stress and promote healing.”

## Conclusion

While the dip in juvenile detention over the past several years is a positive outcome for society, children and youth will continue to commit crimes and become incarcerated despite any efforts that are made to curb this behavior.

However, if our correctional facilities become places of rehabilitation and have a positive impact on children through design and programming, research suggests we can reduce recidivism and prepare our children for re-integration into society once they are released.

Humanizing of correctional facilities isn’t the only answer to this challenge, but it is definitely a tool that designers, architects and correctional officials can use in their attempts to make facilities part of the solution to minimize children’s exposure to traumatic environments.

And while no one is suggesting that children shouldn’t be held responsible for the crimes they commit, the way we redefine incarceration for this very fragile age group may help ensure they have a second chance at a life that might otherwise remain ensnared in the justice system indefinitely.





## Resources

Huskey and Associates - Juvenile Justice Consultant

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Data

Juvenile incarceration rate has dropped in half. Is trend sustainable?

Trauma-Informed Juvenile Facilities: The Next Generation of Residential Care

Montgomery County Center for Adolescent Services

Maple Street Correctional Center



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Norix designs innovative, robust furniture that meets the real-world need for humanizing challenging environments. For more than 30 years, the company has served the behavioral healthcare, corrections, fire/rescue, military, shelter, public safety and variety of commercial industries by providing uniquely reliable furnishings for every application. All furniture is designed for safety, security and extreme durability. Norix furniture is extraordinary by design, surpassing industry standards for strength, safety and long-term performance. Aside from its durability, Norix products also come in aesthetically pleasing designs and colors and are made especially for facilities that require furniture that can humanize their environments.

The privately held company is headquartered in West Chicago, IL with consultative sales representatives and dealers throughout the U.S. In 2012, Norix launched Safe Environments, a news and information blog serving architects, designers, administrators and facility managers involved in the design, construction, and operation of challenging environments. For more information, call 800-234-4900 or visit [www.norix.com](http://www.norix.com).