Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

https://www.vera.org/blog/guiding-stronger-more-effective-juvenile-justice-systems

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

In early February, theNational Juvenile Defender Center(NJDC), supported by the MacArthur FoundationsModels for Changeinitiative, released theNational Juvenile Defense Standards, a set of benchmarks for juvenile courts and juvenile defense attorneys throughout the United States. The national NJDC standards are rooted in best practices, research into what works, and professional codes of responsibility. A collaborative effort by juvenile justice professionals and experts in the juvenile justice systemincluding Robert Listenbee, President Obamas designee to run the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention at the U.S. Department of Justicethey are destined to become a touchstone for improved juvenile justice outcomes. VerasCenter on Youth Justice, which has partnered with the Models for Change initiative, applauds the NJDCs contribution to the field.

On February 27, the Annie E. Casey Foundation released a new Kids Count data snapshot titled*Reducing Youth Incarceration in the United States*.The Casey snapshot reports the important and encouraging finding that the rate of young people locked up because of trouble with the law dropped by more than 40 percent between 1995 and 2010, with no concomitant decrease in public safety. Nationwide, 44 states and the District of Columbia experienced a decline over this 15-year period in the rate of young people confined, with several states reducing their confinement rates by half or more. The drop in confinement makes sense, given a growing trend nationwide of jurisdictions looking for safe and cost effective community-based alternatives to detention and incarceration for young people who do not pose a significant risk to public safety.

These best practice-driven efforts by states and localities have been prompted by a number of influences, including budget pressures, shifts in leadership, and in some cases, lawsuits, as Casey points out. At the same time, Caseys snapshot points out that important work remains to be done in reducing juvenile confinement and increasing the fairness of its use. For example, most youth continue to be confined for non-violent offenses, calling into question whether they pose a legitimate risk to public safety; in 2010, only one of every four confined youth was locked up based on a violent crime index offense (homicide, aggravated assault, robbery, or sexual assault). Further, large disparities remain in youth confinement rates by race. African American youth are nearly five times more likely to be confined, and Latino and Native American youth between two and three times more likely to be confined than white youth. Safely reducing incarceration requires objective policies that restrict its use only to youth who pose a demonstrable risk to public safety.

The Casey snapshot underscores that improving public safety and succeeding in positive youth development (and fewer future contacts with the justice system) require effective alternatives to incarceration, supervision policies, incentives that promote keeping youth out of confinement, and the creation of small, developmentally appropriate and treatment-oriented facilities for the few youth whose confinement is warranted by public safety concerns. While various local- and state-level efforts exist to achieve these goals, more is needed, including a national policy consensus on the appropriate uses of confinement and standards for confinement facilities, all of which could help standardize and spread reforms, as well as provide more consistency and fairness in the experiences of young people in juvenile justice systems nationwide. For anyone who strives to improve juvenile justice systems, Caseys work in the field, including this latest publication, serves as a guidepost.

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