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Severe Storms Researcher

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## The Ohio model

State youth-prison reforms are paying off, but also concentrate the violence

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Thursday January 10, 2013 5:26 AM

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Ohio's youth prisons, employees told *The Dispatch* recently, are chock full of violent and frightening kids. Yes. That is why they are there.

The high rate of assaults — 48 times greater per inmate than in the adult prison system — and the toll it takes on those hired to help these kids is terrible. Efforts should continue to improve safety and to provide these youngsters the help they need to turn their lives around.

But problems with the hardest cases should not obscure the fact that in most other respects, Ohio's handling of young offenders has become a national model. The state now locks up fewer youths, and only the most hard-core cases. This reform concentrated the worst kids in prisons, and overall has cut costs, recidivism and juvenile-crime rates.

The institutions didn't get worse; their residents did.

Under an innovative approach championed in the early 1990s by then-Lt. Gov. Mike DeWine, now the state's attorney general, the state shifted money and responsibilities to communities, with money following the child.

The "Ohio Model" is now being copied by other states, including Illinois and Georgia.

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Previously, counties had an economic incentive to send young offenders to state institutions, where the state would pay the full cost. The new system lets local juvenile-court judges use state dollars to pay for programs that keep young offenders within their community.

That has shifted kids out of state institutions and into an array of creative county-based programs, including intensive probation, community service, counseling and drug-abuse treatment.

Ohio now spends \$38 million less than it did three years ago. One-year recidivism rates (kids who reoffended) dropped to under 23 percent. That's the lowest in nine years. More-compassionate punishment isn't signaling to kids that they can get away with delinquent behavior; instead, it's redeeming them: Ohio led the nation with the largest drop — a 74 percent plunge — in violent juvenile crime between 1995 and 2010.

The state has closed more than half of its youth prisons since 2007. The number of incarcerated youths has dropped from 2,000 to about 500. But this has left the state institutions with a core of truly incorrigible kids.

In 2011, 680 juvenile inmates committed 1,604 assaults. Comparatively, Ohio's adult prisons held 50,607 inmates who committed 2,486 assaults.

Punishments for violence in a juvenile facility are legally restricted, so in some ways, prison workers have their hands tied. The kids are toughs, but still kids. The juvenile system aims to marshal aid to a troubled child, whose behavior is still malleable.

Lawsuits following serious abuse also have forced better treatment of children in Ohio's juvenile institutions.

"In some areas, like reducing the youth population in secure confinement and regionalizing services, Ohio has truly become a model to the nation," Will Harrell, a federal-court-appointed monitor, wrote in his annual assessment in December.

Still, Harrell noted problems also cited by the institutions' staff members: Gangs are prevalent, teaching conditions are poor, and youths aren't getting enough help for mental illnesses.

Currently, 52 percent of all youths are on the mental-health caseload; 91 percent of the girls are. More than half require special-education services. The youth institutions are difficult and dangerous places, indeed.

But the problems that remain should not obscure the progress the state has made in handling youthful offenders.

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