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## Ohio's effort to reform juvenile prisons is national model



Ohio's efforts to reduce the juvenile prison population by diverting child offenders away from prison and into community-based alternatives have made the state a national model, according to a report released Monday. *(File photo)*



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on October 26, 2015 at 12:10 AM, updated October 26, 2015 at 9:26 AM



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COLUMBUS, Ohio -- Twenty-five years after Ohio's juvenile prison system was on the brink of crisis, the state has become a model for how it treats teenage offenders, according to **a report** released Monday.

By sending more teenagers to community-based alternative programs instead of traditional prisons, the state has dramatically decreased the number of incarcerated teenagers and saved millions of taxpayer dollars, the Juvenile Justice Coalition said in the report.

Still, the center found areas where Ohio can improve, said the group's executive director, Erin Davies.

"Ohio's de-incarceration programs are less expensive and more effective than prisons when youth are matched to the right programs," Davies said. "We must continue to urgently embrace what works so we can

give all Ohio youth, families, and communities the best chance for success."

## **Reaching the breaking point**

Ohio's juvenile prison systems in the early 1990s were "at a breaking point," according to the Columbus-based nonprofit's report.

In 1992, there were nearly 2,500 children locked up in the state's 11 juvenile correctional facilities, which were built to hold just 1,400. It was projected that within a few years the number of juvenile inmates would hit 4,000, the group said.

So state lawmakers created a pilot program in 1993 in Cuyahoga County and eight others that sent grant money local courts used to divert non-violent juvenile offenders from youth prisons and into supervised, community-based programs. Those programs connected the children with family counseling, mental health and substance abuse treatment programs and other services that they otherwise were unlikely to get.

The number of incarcerated children in those nine counties dropped by more than 40 percent in the first year, and 85 percent of the courts in the program said they were pleased with the results.

Lawmakers expanded the program statewide a year later and saw similar results.

This year the state housed less than 500 children in youth prisons, just one-fifth the number from 1992.

Some of the programs cut the recidivism rate in half, all while saving the state millions of dollars in juvenile prison costs, according to the report.

The state pays about \$560 a day for each juvenile in prison, according to the report. Putting a child into the community-based programs costs taxpayers about \$200 a day per child, the report said.

## **What Ohio got right**

Ohio's effort to reform its juvenile justice system consisted of five grant programs.

Three of the grants reward courts that match children with programs based on the most current scientific research and the amount of success they have in keeping children from committing more crimes.

Another is based on a formula that sends more money to counties with more children convicted of felonies, but reduces funding for every day a child spends in a traditional prison. The result incentivizes court officials to divert children from prisons and into alternate programs as early as possible.

The other grant is based solely on population.

The report found that the program reached the success it did partly due to its flexibility. The state lets each county choose local organizations to partner with to provide the services.

And since teenagers who commit a felony in urban counties like Cuyahoga or Summit likely have different

needs than teens in rural counties like Geauga, the program allows court officials to provide services that are tailored to their offenders.

Another part of the effort's success involves rewarding counties that not only based their program on the most current scientific research on effective counseling, but also setting specific goals and reaching them.

The resulting program put Ohio "at the forefront of innovation" and made it a model for states looking to ease juvenile prison overcrowding, said Nate Balis, director of the Juvenile Justice Strategy Group at the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

### Where it can improve

For all of the success that Ohio has experienced in reforming its juvenile justice system, the report found there are still areas where the state can improve.

At times, the state has struggled to find the right amount of services to give juvenile offenders. The study found that giving too much counseling to children who are considered at low-risk of re-offending could actually increase their likelihood of committing another crime.

And by basing how much money each county gets partly on the number of felony convictions in the juvenile court, the program may actually encourage juvenile courts to seek more felony convictions, rather than allow the child to plead to a misdemeanor.



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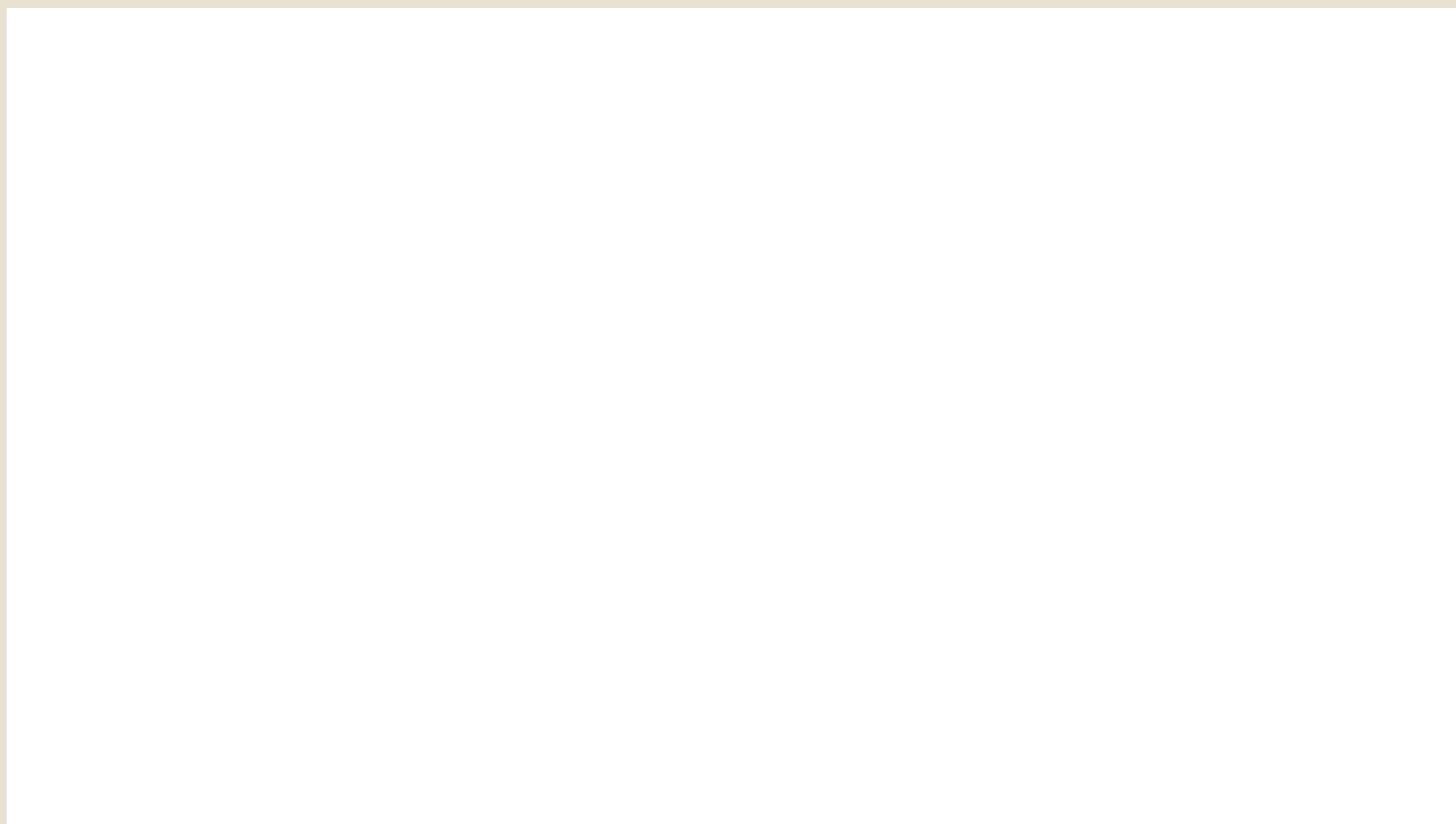
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