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## **State Safer With Fewer Children Locked Up Costs also kept down through community programs**

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Connecticut locks up fewer children than it did just a decade ago. But are we safer?

The provocative answer is that not only is juvenile crime down, but we're saving money.

A new analysis by the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance reveals that efforts to help young offenders without incarcerating them may be making a significant difference. Keeping 16-year-olds who commit minor offenses out of the adult courts has not overloaded the juvenile justice system — nor has it lead to more serious violent youth crime.

It's cheaper to provide services in the home and the community, instead of sending them to juvenile detention facilities. It costs about \$377 per day to keep a minor in detention. When we send them to out-of-state residential facilities the cost increases to as much as \$562 a day. Over the past decade there has been a 60 percent drop in the number of juveniles sent to residential placement or the Connecticut Juvenile Training School — where it costs about \$744 a day and the average stay is about six months.

"Conservatives say we should lock them all up and liberals say we should give them all a hug. That's not what we say works," said Abby Anderson, executive director of the alliance, a coalition of nonprofit groups. "We are moving away from putting kids in cells."

"Now what we do is we try to keep kids in the community," Anderson told me. "If you have mental health issues you get mental health services. If you have substance abuse issues you can get substance abuse service."

"The myth is that if we do rehabilitation instead of punishment it will be bad for public safety. The opposite is true," she said.

With a state deficit running in the billions of dollars, it's not hard to see why supporters of community-based programs are hustling to get their message out. In

this case, it's a message we ought to pay close attention to. Not long ago Connecticut was one of the few states that treated 16-year-old offenders as adults.

According to the alliance's report, youth crime, which includes anyone under the age of 18, has dropped by 25 percent over the past decade. Meanwhile, because of a change in state law in 2007, children who were picked up by police for running away, chronic truancy or other relatively minor offenses are no longer sent to costly detention facilities when they violate a judge's order.

Instead, state-funded "Family Support Centers" provide children and their families access to a range of services. In another example, simply adding mental-health professionals in court who can immediately assess children has saved the state hundreds of thousands of dollars.

"It costs a lot more money to lock a kid up than to treat them in the community. The idea is give them the service they need," said Christine Rapollo director of delinquent defense in the chief public defender's office. "We've changed things and we haven't seen spikes in violent crime."

Some of the most interesting news involves the controversial move legislators made that keeps 16-year-olds who commit minor crimes in juvenile court. The decision was based on research that shows that keeping teenagers out of our adult courts prevents them from becoming more serious criminals. Opponents said the move would overload juvenile courts, but figures since January, when the new law took affect, show that the caseload has not increased substantially.

A long-running class-action lawsuit first filed in 1993, *Emily J. v. Rell*, is also credited with forcing Connecticut to make changes, particularly with requiring the state to provide more community-based services.

"If you provide the right services to kids, you can decrease incarceration rates," said Martha Stone, a lawyer in the case who leads the Center for Children's Advocacy. "We've made tremendous progress in the last 10 years."

There are still significant problems. Stone and others say minority children are disproportionately represented and they are treated more harshly. Schools, increasingly, are turning to the justice system to enforce classroom discipline.

But there's a larger message of both fiscal responsibility and crime prevention that shouldn't be missed: keeping kids out of jail saves money and makes us safer.

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