



Set



Far fewer Cuyahoga County youth being sent to state prisons

Weather



The Cuyahoga County Juvenile Justice Center (Marvin Fong, The Plain Dealer)



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CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Cuyahoga County is sending fewer than half of the kids to state youth prisons that it did just five years ago.

The 60 percent decline is in line with a state – and national -- trends of dramatic drops in the number of youth incarcerated.

Looking back a decade, the decline is closer to 80 percent – or more.

Juvenile court officials cite a number of factors in the drop – which has also been seen in the number of **adults sent to prison from Cuyahoga County as well.**

Using financial incentives, state officials have encouraged counties to find ways to treat and rehabilitate youth offenders locally when

possible.

One of the state programs, **RECLAIM (Reasoned and Equitable Community and Local Alternatives to Incarceration of Minors)** and a newer iteration called Targeted RECLAIM, has sent millions of dollars to Cuyahoga County to help pay for treatment of youths in the community.

During roughly the same time frame juvenile felony arrests and juvenile transfers to adult court have each declined.

For instance, in Cleveland, juvenile felony arrests are down more than 30 percent from 2009 through the end of last year.

In Cuyahoga County, court officials also formed a committee, which reviews most of the cases that could potentially yield a sentence to the **Ohio Department of Youth Services**.

The team, which includes detention workers, a mental health expert, an ODYS employee, a children's services worker, a probation department representative and current Administrative Judge Thomas F. O'Malley. (O'Malley will finish his term as administrative judge this year. **Juvenile Court Judge Kristin Sweeney will take over in 2014.**)

The committee reviews each case for up to an hour hashing through details about what has been tried so far to address the youth's problems and discussing whether there are alternatives to sending the youth to prison that would also keep the community safe.

Since January 2010, the committee has reviewed nearly 230 cases – making a recommendation that 48 of them serve state sentences.

Ultimately, the judge presiding over the case determines whether to follow that recommendation.

Prosecutors, public defenders and appointed lawyers can also make arguments to the judge after the recommendation is made.

Judge Kristin Sweeney said she has seen a near reversal in the way the court handles sentencing since she joined the court in 2004.

"When I started we had only a handful of slots for residential treatment and we could send as many kids as we wanted to ODYS."

Research and other factors led to the philosophical change, said Tim McDevitt, director of probation for the court.

McDevitt said evidence over time showed that many youth who were incarcerated for low-level or non-violent crimes were released from state youth facilities and committed additional crimes.

"The hope is if we treat these youth in the community we can disrupt their delinquent networks rather than help them form new delinquent networks," McDevitt said.

O'Malley said treating youth locally through programs at private facilities also can help keep their parents and family members more engaged in what is going on with the child.

The programs youths are referred to instead of incarceration vary but in many instances they involve residential treatment or a secure placement for a number of months.

In those settings, youth can get therapy and also get help for mental health issues that sometimes contribute to the crimes they were accused of committing.

Linda Schettler, assistant vice president for **campus programs at Beech Brook**, said many court-referred children end up being treated for trauma, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and addiction issues.

Schettler said many stay in a residential treatment setting for three or four months before they are returned to families and neighborhoods.

Much of that time is spent teaching a youth how to recognize and cope with their surroundings.

"Neighborhoods aren't going to change but we can work with schools and parents to find ways to support that child doing well," she said.

Often times, youth work on anger management, family issues and coping with gang-involvement.

"I think often times when the youth first come in they have a pretty rough exterior," Schettler said. "But if we are really able to get to the trauma and get them to engage they respond. Often times they've never talked about it before or nobody has ever really listened."

Schettler said as agencies like Beech Brook have taken on more court-involved kids they have had to adjust to the need for more structure, while adhering to treatment principles.



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pathz 1 hour ago

and the people who are not criminals are paying for these bullies to get 'therapy'???

i think its better that they go to prison

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neobiz 1 hour ago

Thankfully, you are not in a decision making roll, this also makes good fiscal sense as it appears the chances of re-offending are down using this approach.

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pathz 1 hour ago

neo,

there is no evidence that giving them therapy is better for the rest of us than putting them in prison. show me!

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neobiz 47 minutes ago

Since the numbers are lower for the youths being sent to prison first, one can assume some of those where first placed into the program and didn't make it, hence ending up in a prison. One thing for sure, they WILL make the wrong "friends" while incarcerated in a prison. Mind you, we are talking about children here, most of whom don't have good influences in their young lives. A program like this at least makes an attempt to address the cause of bad behavior in our youths today. Perhaps if these programs where in the prisons as well it may make a bigger impact in curbing re-offending. We have to break the cycle, the same old doesn't work....

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neobiz 45 minutes ago

Also realize, we are all paying for prison stays too, a lot more....

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pathz 21 minutes ago

if we could make the prisoners earn their keep, prisons would not cost that much.

we need to give prisoners some sort of drugs to calm them down. and no more weight rooms. something to lower their testosterone levels

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