

New York Times: Fewer Teenagers in Lockups

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Federal statistics released earlier this summer show that the number of juvenile offenders held under lock and key dropped by about 25 percent during the last decade, and by more than half in Vermont, Connecticut, New Mexico and Louisiana. That's welcome news, given that young offenders who are locked up are more likely to become dangerous criminals than those who are supervised through community-based guidance programs.

While many states have refashioned their policies, some continue to lock up teenagers despite declining violent crime rates. An [analysis](#) of the most recent federal data by the Research and Evaluation Center at John Jay College of Criminal Justice shows that only 1 in 20 arrests of young people are for serious, violent crimes like murder, rape or aggravated assault. About 80 percent of those taken in state custody are locked up for drug offenses, misdemeanors or property crimes.

These teenagers would be more cheaply and effectively managed through programs that supervise and monitor them in the neighborhoods where they live. Several states, including North Carolina, Ohio and Oregon, have moved away from youth incarceration, reserving it for truly dangerous offenders, according to the study.

Other states have also reduced the population in juvenile facilities, but only because they needed to save money and because crime is down. In those places, the juvenile inmate population could easily go back up when the budget squeeze ends — an outcome that would be bad for young offenders, society and public coffers.

There are now several examples of reformed systems with long, successful track records. The study points to programs like the one adopted by Ohio in the early 1990s, "Reclaim Ohio," which shifted responsibility for juvenile incarceration to the counties, and encouraged local governments to treat low-risk young offenders close to home. This kind of approach has reduced costs and lowered incarceration rates for teenagers without jeopardizing public safety.