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## Transfers to adult court don't explain drop in youth crime

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By Jeffrey Butts | Guest columnist  
April 20, 2012

The state of Florida transfers far more juvenile offenders to the criminal (adult) court system than any other state in the nation. In this sense at least, Florida can rightly claim to be No. 1.

Florida's population is roughly half that of California's, but it transfers youths to adult criminal court at a rate that is eight times that of California.

According to FBI statistics, the rate of violent youth crime in Florida dropped 57 percent between 1995 and 2010. Juvenile arrests for murder fell 69 percent.

The Orange County State Attorney's office recently connected these dots and claimed that the falling rate of violent juvenile crime in the Orlando area was caused by the large numbers of youth tried in adult courts.

Like most easy answers, this easy answer to youth violence is wrong, and here's why.

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Orange County and the state of Florida are not the only places where juvenile violence has plummeted in recent years. Violent youth crime has declined nationwide since the 1990s. According to the most recent statistics from the U.S. Department of Justice, rates of youth violence across the country are half what they were in the mid-1990s. In fact, juvenile violence is lower than at any time since the 1970s.

So, Orlando cannot claim the prize for declining youth violence. In fact, compared with other states, Florida's crime drop is about average.

The Research and Evaluation Center at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City recently examined the uses of criminal-court transfer and the scale of declining crime in Florida and five other states where the data allow for a fair comparison — Arizona, California, Ohio, Oregon and Washington.

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While juvenile violence dropped 57 percent in Florida between 1995 and 2010, it fell in these other states as well.

The largest drop was in Ohio, where violent juvenile crime plunged 74 percent since 1995, followed by Arizona's decline of 65 percent and Oregon's dip of 63 percent. California and Washington saw juvenile violence drop nearly as much as in Florida — 50 percent and 54 percent, respectively.

If Florida prosecutors were correct, these variations in the falling rate of juvenile violence would follow a pattern.

Namely, we would see the largest crime declines in the states that transferred the most juveniles to criminal court.

Florida's use of transfer (approximately 165 transfers per 100,000 youth population) is nearly double that of its closest competitors, Oregon and Arizona (96 and 84 per 100,000, respectively). Yet, both of those states beat Florida in the crime drop.

In fact, the state with the lowest use of transfer was Ohio at 20 per 100,000, but Ohio's crime decline of 74 percent was the steepest of all six states.

If Florida transfers far more juveniles to criminal court than any other state and yet the state's crime decline is about average, then it is simply wrong to credit criminal-court transfer for recent reductions in youth violence.

What did cause the nearly 20-year drop in violent crime across the United States? We will likely debate this for years to come. Some criminologists say it is related to changing social attitudes and economics, or the preventive effects of community policing. Others argue that crime-reduction programs are more sophisticated now, following more than 20 years of investment in research and evaluation.

Experts may never agree on the exact causes for the crime decline, but there is one thing we can all agree on: There is no evidence to suggest that the falling rate of youth violence was caused by states prosecuting greater numbers of youth in adult court.

Criminal-court transfer is an idea of the 1980s. We can and should do better. Policy makers should realize that the juvenile-justice system has more to offer than the adult system in terms of effective programs and sound solutions. We need to rely on a mix of strategies other than simple punishment, including investments in youth employment, educational development and family-support programs.

The nation is ill-served by public officials who respond to fears of youth violence by dusting off old policy ideas from the 1980s, especially when those policies were never proved effective.

Jeffrey Butts is the director of the Research and Evaluation Center at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City.

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