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## EDITORIAL

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# Sending troubled kids to places other than jail made a difference

Sunday August 11, 2013 5:29 AM

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Comments and questions should be directed to the editorial page editor.

Ohio has made tremendous progress in redeeming youthful offenders with an innovative program that has become a national model — one that shouldn't be judged by a few delinquents who were involved in high-profile crimes.

A *Dispatch* story last Sunday reported that police, a prosecutor and some community activists are questioning whether Ohio is avoiding incarceration at all costs, risking society by letting kids run loose.

This follows a deadly shooting spree on the South Side, in which 17-year-old Devonere Simmonds, a frequent flier in juvenile court, led police on a statewide manhunt after two murders. Simmonds' prior juvenile offenses include carrying concealed, loaded handguns and probation violations.

In another case, which left a boy dead outside of Linden McKinley High School on Jan. 17, all the youths involved had lengthy court histories, from the 17-year-old accused of supplying the gun to the 16-year-old alleged shooter to the 15-year-old victim.

Unfortunately, some kids who kill or get killed have histories that foreshadowed their final brush with the law. They were in gangs, or they rebelled at home or lacked parenting. Maybe they used drugs or struggled with mental-health issues.

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But it's wrong to blame a system that provides proven life-changing intervention in a way that both costs less and keeps youngsters who commit lower-level offenses out of jail, where they would encounter truly hardened criminals. The "Ohio Model" shifts juvenile offenders who are judged to be less of a threat into an array of creative county-based programs, including intensive probation, community service, counseling and drug treatment.

Since 2007, when the state incarcerated 2,000 youths, the state has closed half of its youth prisons. Last year, only 578 kids were locked up. The Ohio Department of Youth Services, which has a \$250 million budget this year, will spend \$48.3 million less than in 2010.

Far from putting the community at greater risk, this smarter approach, tailored to the individual, is lowering crime. One-year recidivism rates (kids who reoffend) dropped to under 23 percent, a 7-percentage-point reduction in less than a decade. Ohio led the nation with the largest drop, a 74 percent plunge, in violent juvenile crime between 1995 and 2010.

Other states, including Georgia and Illinois, are copying the Ohio Model.

Police and prosecutors are frustrated and want courts to lock up juveniles with long records of defiant behavior. But the philosophy behind the juvenile justice system, unlike the punishment-oriented adult-prison system, is rehabilitation and redemption.

Which makes sense: Children are not small adults; their brains and reasoning are not fully development. And sadly, many have been victims of hideous neglect and abuse.

The kids society locks up will get out someday. The question is, what will they be like then? Incarcerating children whose crimes are not all that serious — skipping school or being disorderly — puts them at risk, either because of victimization by tougher kids or because these institutions inadvertently become a finishing school for crime.

The Ohio Model, championed in the 1990s by now-Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine, has been an impressive success. While serious juvenile crimes might indicate a need to re-examine court placement criteria, in the end, the blame for crimes lies with those who commit them.

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On his way to visit Ohio State today with his parents and brother, the last thing...



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