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## Juvenile justice can be less expensive and more effective

By Sue Burrell - Special to The Bee



A new report from the Justice Policy Institute gathers the full price tag of juvenile incarceration – not just the actual cost of detention, which is considerable, but also the long-term costs in future reoffending, to the economy and victimization of youths themselves. The report, released this week, could not come at a better time for California.

Although we have cut the population of our state juvenile institutions from more than 10,000 in the mid-1990s to 653 last month, and realigned resources to the counties so that many more youths may be served closer to their homes and communities, we have not yet fully grasped the costs and impact of incarceration.

We still have the second highest rate of juvenile detention in the country, with an average of 7,834 youths in local detention in 2013. A 2012 survey found that it cost an average of \$128,502 a year to hold each youth in juvenile halls and \$105,160 a year in county ranches and camps.

It would be one thing if these extraordinary expenditures produced successful young people and a safer community, but the report points out that incarceration does neither. Extended incarceration is often viewed as the best way to achieve public safety when a young person has committed a serious crime, but research indicates that it either has no impact, or has a negative impact, on recidivism. While confinement in quality programs may help, longer incarceration does not yield better results.

Incarceration also increases the probability that a young person will fail to finish school, and the likelihood that he or she will be unemployed. This in turn lowers wages and income, ultimately reducing tax revenues and hurting the economy. It also increases the chances that the person will need public benefits to survive. The impact on the young person's life and enormous economic costs must be factored into any decision about incarceration.

The report also points out the danger of further victimization youths may suffer while incarcerated. Extensive research has confirmed the danger of sexual assault for confined youths.

These findings suggest a number of things for policymakers in California. First, we need to consider the alternatives in developing programs and services. When the costs of a year in custody are contrasted with the services we could buy instead, it doesn't look nearly as good. Instead of spending money on expanding "brick and mortar" institutions, we could pay for youths to go to college; for tutoring and mentoring; for mental health, trauma and substance abuse treatment; for computer, sports, art and music classes; and for writing programs and other activities to help them to develop skills. We could help their families to keep them in the community.

Second, recognizing that some youths are going to be confined because of the seriousness of their offenses, there should be specific rehabilitation goals instead of simply warehousing them. The amount of time in custody should match the length of time need to accomplish specific goals.

Third, we should tighten court processing resulting in unnecessary incarceration. For instance, we should change California laws that allow extra time for weekends and holidays before youths are initially brought before the judge. We should eliminate the weeks and months of wait times before transfers to placements. We should stop incarcerating youths who are incompetent to stand trial because of mental disabilities or mental illness. We should stop incarcerating youths who commit low-level probation violations.

Fourth, we should do a much better job of tracking what we are doing and whether it works. Despite the millions of dollars we are spending on young people, we have no statewide data on recidivism or other outcomes.

All of these things can be accomplished, and we can learn from successful models elsewhere. As Californians, we deserve to get full value for our dollars.

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