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Is the Decline in Juvenile Incarceration Due to Reform or Falling Crime Rates?

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Is the Decline in Juvenile Incarceration Due to Reform or Falling Crime Rates?

by Jeffrey A. Butts

Juvenile justice advocacy groups in the United States are celebrating the nation's falling rate of juvenile incarceration. How do we explain this welcome trend? Some see it as evidence of reform, suggesting that cities and states around the country are handling more young offenders with community-based programs rather than with incarceration or other forms of out-of-home placement. Is this accurate?

Certainly, the number of juvenile offenders held in various forms of residential placement has plummeted since the 1990s. The per capita rate of youth incarceration in 2010 (the most recent data available) was more than 40 percent lower than the rate measured in 1995.

The falling use of incarceration, however, may be due to declining rates of serious crime. Juvenile arrest rates for the types of offenses most likely to result in incarceration (i.e., murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, serious property crimes, sex offenses other than rape, and weapon offenses) also fell more than 50 percent since 1995.

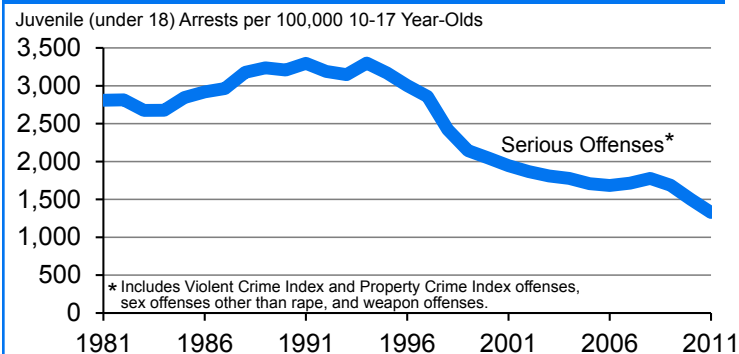
If the changing number of youth in residential placement is viewed in percentage terms relative to 1997, it is clear that youth incarceration closely follows the trends in arrests and court referrals for serious offenses.

By examining national data about court decisions, it is also clear that the use of residential placement has not changed substantially since the 1990s, whether one considers all delinquency cases, or only those cases involving formal charges and adjudication. Placement utilization is steady.

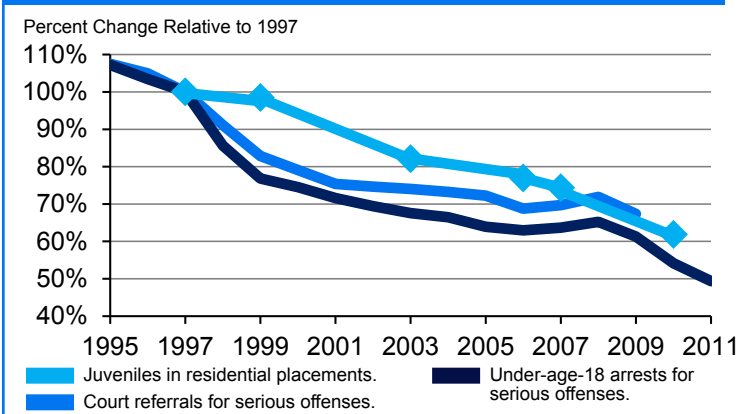
Changes in incarceration might vary from state to state or city to city. When national trends are steady relative to crime, however, the declines championed in one jurisdiction must be offset by increases elsewhere. If such offsets cannot be found, it is difficult to argue that the national decline in youth incarceration is evidence of intentional reform.

Data Sources: Arrest data are from the FBI Uniform Crime Reports as reported by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), with the exception of 2011 data which were calculated by John Jay College using the same methods adopted by BJS. Data for residential placements and juvenile court dispositions are from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP).

Serious Juvenile Crime in Decline Since 1995



Incarceration Trends Mirror Arrests & Referrals



Placement Patterns Have Not Changed Since 1995

