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Report finds Indiana jails youths at rate higher

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7:01 AM CDT, June 12, 2008

INDIANAPOLIS

Indiana authorities place youths ages 10-15 behind bars at a rate nearly 1 1/2 times the national average, putting those kids at greater risk than peers to underachieve in school and the workplace and end up behind bars again, a report released Thursday showed.

The latest Kids Count Data Book ranks Indiana 34th among states in child well-being and shows the percentage of children living in poverty in 2006 rose 1 percentage point to 18 percent -- nearly one in five and the same as a declining national rate.

The report, based on U.S. Census data, showed Indiana detained and committed 10- to 15-year-olds for juvenile offenses in 2006 at a rate of 183 per 100,000, compared with a national rate of 125 per 100,000. The only higher rates were found in South Dakota (373 per 100,000), Wyoming (334), the District of Columbia (294), Alabama (201) and South Carolina (185).

Data shows children in the juvenile justice system don't go as far in school, work and earn less, have less stable families, more health problems and are more likely to be imprisoned again, said the report compiled by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a private charity working to improve the lives of children.

Also, 50 percent to 80 percent of youths released from juvenile detention centers are rearrested within three years, a trend noted by Doug Church, president of the Indiana State Bar Association.

"It comes as no shock once many of these children are in the juvenile justice system these children are on a path to be lifelong residents of our prison system," Church said.

The Baltimore-based Casey Foundation called for several reforms including relying more on community-based services, keeping children and youths out of the adult justice system, age-appropriate policies and solutions, and reducing racial disparities.

Bill Stanczykiewicz, president and CEO of the Indiana Youth Institute, noted the report is the latest in a series of recent studies from different groups calling attention to this state's high rate of incarcerating young people. The institute is part of the Kids Count network.

However, Stanczykiewicz said several counties -- including Marion, Allen, Howard, Porter, Bartholomew and Clinton -- have instituted programs or are experimenting with alternative sentencing for nonviolent juvenile crimes that generally are less costly and less onerous while punishing and rehabilitating delinquent youths and providing restitution to their victims.

"When done well, they lower crime among those juvenile offenders," he said.

National research shows many nonviolent offenders are convicted of misdemeanors, probation violations or other offenses that were handled in schools before many districts instituted "zero tolerance" policies in the 1990s, Stanczykiewicz said.

The Kids Count report said juvenile detention centers often are dumping grounds for troubled kids who would be better served elsewhere, such as mental health centers. A 2004 survey by the private, nonprofit Indiana Juvenile Justice Task Force projected half the children in Indiana's juvenile justice system needed some kind of psychiatric care.

The report said 74 percent of the youths jailed in Indiana committed nonviolent offenses, compared with 66 percent nationally.

Bart Lubow, a Casey Foundation expert on high-risk youth, said juvenile delinquency cuts across all classes, ages and races, but defendants from lower social and economic classes show up more often in court caseloads. That's because wealthier families are better able to make restitution and place their children in alternative programs.

The state bar association is sponsoring a pilot program in which six counties have begun screening youths entering detention centers for mental illness.

The report also notes that blacks and other youths from racial minorities are far more likely than whites to end up in juvenile detention. The disparity is among the issues the new Indiana Commission on Disproportionality is taking up this summer.

The latest Kids Count Data Book ranked Indiana 34th among the 50 states in child well-being based on 10 measures of child well-being in health, education and economics. Indiana ranked 31st last year. Stanczykiewicz said consistently poor showings in two areas -- infant mortality rate (39th among states) and child death rate (38th) -- hold Indiana back from ranking better. -----

On the Net:

Kids Count: www.kidscount.org

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