

OP-ED: Counties Can Improve Juvenile Justice System Outcomes

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Ever since I learned that a child's reading level in third grade can be an indicator of his or her likelihood to be incarcerated as an adult, I've become increasingly determined that counties need to partner with other agencies and intergovernmental jurisdictions to work together, take action early and prevent kids from entering the justice system. We can't wait for kids to walk through the doors of our jails and then offer them help – we need to prevent them from coming in the door altogether.

Youth are an important part of our communities and deserve the best programming possible, but current practices and programs used in juvenile detention are increasingly being proven to be ineffective and even harmful. So, why do county governments continue to spend huge chunks of our budgets on practices that aren't working?

As a county commissioner, I know that community leaders want to do the right thing for young people, but all of us need to learn a lot more about what works. That is why, as the past president of the [National Association of Counties](#) (NACo), my focus was on Smart Justice. County governments are the primary local provider of health, justice and social services and so play a central role in improving the juvenile justice system. These responsibilities provide the opportunity to implement comprehensive, collaborative, evidence-based programs and policies that bolster public safety and improve human outcomes.

We need to get a lot smarter a lot faster if we want to help improve the lives of our youth and begin reducing the \$70 billion counties spend each year to run the criminal justice system and the \$69 billion we spend on human services. When we fail in juvenile justice, those same youth end up coming right back to us as adults through our other services. And many of our juvenile justice systems are failing.

The juvenile system is not fiscally sound. Thousands of juveniles are held in secure detention each year, often costing \$200-\$300 per child per day. Counties also foot the bill for many of the related costs and services. In addition to being expensive, current detention practices do not reduce recidivism. In effect, we are paying more for less.

Another flaw is that youth of color are overrepresented at nearly every point of contact with the juvenile justice system. Even though they represent only one-third of the U.S. youth population, youth of color [make up two-thirds of youth in detention and placement](#).

These disparities have been occurring for decades, and it is time that counties work toward a justice system that treats all youth fairly regardless of their race or ethnicity.

So where do county leaders begin to fix their juvenile justice system?

We need to reconsider who is being detained and how they are treated. The vast majority of kids in detention are there for nonviolent offenses, and many are suffering from mental health or substance use issues. For example, in my home state of Nebraska, [81 percent of youth in custody](#) are there for a nonviolent offense. Nationwide, [fewer than 5 percent of youth](#) who are arrested are accused of a violent crime. Additionally, up to 70 percent of youth in the juvenile justice system suffer from a mental health disorder. Their unmet behavioral needs are often a contributing factor to their contact with the justice system.

Learn more about community-based alternatives at the Juvenile Justice Resource Hub.

Most of these kids are considered “low risk” to reoffend, and there are good tools available that counties can use to identify which youth who would be better served with treatment rather than jail time. Research shows that most juvenile offenders are less likely to be involved in subsequent delinquent behavior when they remain in their community and receive services that address their underlying needs. Community-based services are generally less costly than care in correctional facilities. Diverting youth out of the juvenile justice system early in the process can save counties on expenses associated with indigent defense, court processing and hearing costs – not to mention decreasing the likelihood that the child will eventually end up in the adult criminal justice system. By keeping many young people out of secure detention and providing effective treatment, we lower county costs while improving outcomes.

NACo is addressing counties’ needs for reliable information and new approaches by partnering with [Models for Change](#), a juvenile justice reform initiative of the [John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation](#). The partnership will assist county leaders and staff as they undertake changes to their juvenile justice systems. Through NACo’s juvenile justice publications, webinars, blog posts, podcasts and forums at sites around the country, county leaders can learn effective ways to improve public safety and support juveniles, even while grappling with tough fiscal decisions.

Our nation’s youth are the key to our future and we must put more emphasis on fair and effective treatment for those who need it. I encourage all county leaders and staff to explore NACo’s juvenile justice resources, examine the current state of their own systems and implement changes that will result in more positive outcomes their communities. We owe it to all those we represent and serve to get out from under the unsustainable burden of increasingly ineffective juvenile justice systems that cost too much money, damage too many young lives, erode public safety and work directly against their original rehabilitative mission.

Chris Rodgers — sworn into office as a Douglas County, Nebraska, Commissioner on Jan. 4, 2005 — is focused on increasing public health resources, strengthening community corrections programs and controlling spending through a better use of taxpayer’s dollars.