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Virginia's costly youth prison system is failing kids and communities

Proven alternatives in other states reduce recidivism, make for safer communities, cost less

RICHMOND, VA – Almost three-quarters of youth who have been held in Virginia's juvenile prisons are convicted of another crime within three years of release. By failing to help young Virginians become productive adults, Virginia's youth prison system is also failing to keep communities safe, and Virginians are paying a big price.

Virginia locks up more youth in state prisons than many other states, according to new analysis in a report that looks at Virginia's state youth prison system. Opportunities exist to improve it based on lessons from other states. Reforms could save the state money and make for safer communities.

As of 2013, the most recently available federal data for cross-state comparisons, Virginia incarcerated 79 youth for every 100,000 youth age 10 or older living in the state. That's 75 percent higher than the national rate of 45 incarcerated youth per 100,000 youth in the country.

"Holding youth accountable for their actions is important, and so is setting the groundwork so those youth can become productive adults," says Michael Cassidy, President and CEO of The Commonwealth Institute for Fiscal Analysis, which produced the report.

In the current system it costs about \$148,000 per-youth to keep them incarcerated in one of the state's two large juvenile prisons: the Bon Air and Beaumont Juvenile Correctional Centers, both in suburban Richmond. But community-based alternatives exist that could reduce that cost, and also produce better outcomes for youthful offenders. For example, a program of comprehensive non-residential accountability and treatment services, plus a specialized educational program, could cost just \$40,000 per youth for a year of services.

"Reducing the amount of money the state spends running large youth prisons could cover the cost of providing a continuum of accountability and treatment options tailored to the needs of each community and youth, while providing some leftover money to reinvest in prevention programs or other state priorities," says Cassidy.

Several other states have implemented juvenile justice reforms, reducing the use of ineffective, outdated youth prisons, without seeing any increase in crime. Since 1995, California has reduced its rate of youth confinement by 94 percent. At the same time, the juvenile crime rate fell 67 percent and the felony crime rate fell 71 percent. Ohio and Texas both slashed their rate of confinement in state facilities by 75 percent between 1997 and 2013 while also seeing decreases in their crime rate.

In Virginia, there has been growing support for juvenile justice reform in the past year, including a [recent report](#) by Justice Fellowship, Right on Crime, and the Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy recommending community-based reforms to Virginia's youth prison system, and a [proposal](#) by the Department of Juvenile Justice to replace the state's youth prisons with a mix of community-based alternatives and smaller facilities. In addition, advocates from across the political spectrum have united in a new, broad-based campaign in support of community alternatives to youth incarceration called [Reinvest In Supportive Environments \(RISE\) for Youth](#). The Commonwealth Institute is a member of RISE for Youth.

"While important progress has been made recently in reducing the number of kids in youth prisons, Virginia is still behind national trends," says Cassidy. "Getting youth out of the large failed prisons and into settings and programs that work better is critical to helping the youth become productive adults so that both they and our communities will be safe."

The full report, Smarter Choices for Virginia's Youth and Future, is available at www.thecommonwealthinstitute.org.

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