Kansas Reforms Improve Juvenile Justice

Costly residential facilities are being replaced with effective community-based programs

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In December, the Kansas Juvenile Justice Oversight Committee released its first annual report evaluating the implementation and impact of bipartisan, comprehensive juvenile justice reforms adopted by the state in 2016. Many of the new policies have already shown signs of success.

The measures were enacted to promote public safety, improve outcomes for youths and families, and save taxpayer dollars. The report highlights a number of positive outcomes occurring so far. For example:
Between July 2016 and June 2017, the state experienced a 34 percent decrease in the total juvenile out-of-home population, including reductions in placements in detention facilities, group homes, and secure state-run juvenile correctional facilities. (See Figure 1.)

During the same period, the group home population dropped 58 percent (the largest decline among the out-of-home population).

The reductions allowed the Kansas Department of Corrections to close the Larned Juvenile Correctional Facility, one of its two juvenile correctional facilities, in March 2017.

The state has shifted more than $12 million of savings linked to the reforms to evidence-based supervision and services for youths living at home. The statewide expansion of community-based services, which range from cognitive-behavioral therapy to treatment for substance use disorders, has already served 350 youths and families across all 31 judicial districts and is expected to serve 600 additional families during the current fiscal year.

Finally, the state is granting a total of $5 million this year to counties for service expansion, and three state pilot programs across nine judicial districts are working to reduce youth reoffending by providing mentorship and counseling programs.

By 2022, the reforms are projected to reduce out-of-home youth placements by 60 percent, saving the state a total of $72 million. The law requires that all savings be reinvested in effective alternatives to incarceration, which should further enhance public safety and keep families together when appropriate.

Research shows that residential commitments do not typically improve outcomes and can increase the likelihood of reoffending, particularly for youths who have committed low-level offenses. Despite these findings, a majority of youths were placed out of home before the reforms for such offenses at a cost of up to $89,000 per youth each year.
Most of the reforms took effect in 2017, leading to several key initiatives. Among those were expanded services in each judicial district, supervision tailored to youths’ risk and needs, development of a continuum of responses to strengthen probation, negotiation of agreements between schools and law enforcement to reduce court referrals, and creation of a standardized statewide diversion process to prevent low-risk youths from becoming more involved in the system.

The legislation was based on policy recommendations from the 17-member Kansas Juvenile Justice Workgroup, which received technical assistance from The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Crime and Justice Institute at Community Resources for Justice. The group analyzed data across every stage of the juvenile justice system and held more than two dozen roundtable discussions with stakeholder groups, including members of law enforcement, families of impacted youths, crime victims, and judges.

Kansas is one of many states working to safely reduce youth correctional populations. Georgia, Hawaii, Kentucky, South Dakota, Utah, and West Virginia all have adopted innovative policies that have put a priority on residential space for those youths who commit the most chronic or violent offenses. These states also direct a portion of the savings to recidivism reduction programs. Kansas’ experience shows that by aligning policies and
resources with research, states can reduce incarceration and get a much higher return on their juvenile justice investments to better serve youths, their families, and communities.

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