



Press Release:

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**New Data Show Youth Incarcerations for Misbehavior High In Kentucky, but Declining
Community Alternatives Cheaper and Better for Public Safety than Jail**

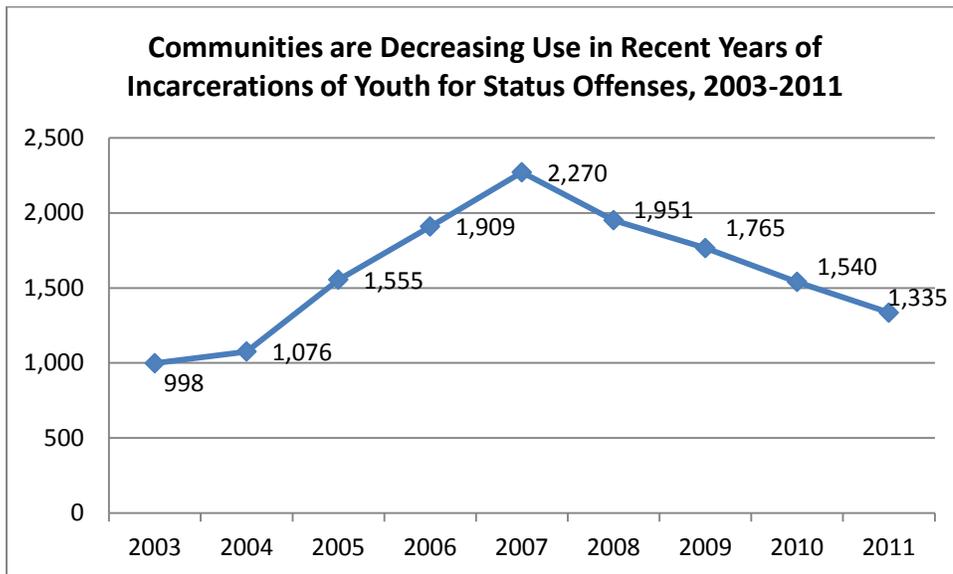
Jeffersontown, KY – Kentucky has one of the highest rates of any state in the nation of putting kids in jail for things like running away or missing school, yet the trend is moving to fewer youth incarcerated, according to an updated report, [*Ending the Use of Incarceration for Status Offenses in Kentucky*](#), released today by Kentucky Youth Advocates. The report recommends continuing to lower the number of youth in jail for misbehaviors by shifting to more effective alternatives that hold youth accountable while saving tax dollars and avoiding the unintended consequences on public safety of incarcerating youth for minor offenses.

Adolescence can be a vulnerable time for youth as they attempt to define themselves and become more independent, but with the right approach, most youth become successful adults. Many engage in troubling behavior like skipping school and running away from home, which are acts referred to as status offenses that can lead a child to jail, only because they are under the age of 18. While youth need to be held accountable for the behavior, incarcerating them for these minor offenses has the unintended consequence of increasing the chance they will actually commit crimes.

“The question is not if adolescents will act out as they grow, rather when,” said Terry Brooks, executive director of Kentucky Youth Advocates. “While it’s hard to handle youth who skip school or act out, these behaviors pose no threat to public safety. Locking them up is the most expensive discipline option, and research has shown it to be the least effective approach to putting them on the right path.”

In 2011, children were incarcerated 1,335 times for status offenses, which accounted for approximately 17 percent of all youth incarcerations in Kentucky that year. In other words, in about one of every six times, youth were jailed for something that would not even be a crime for an adult. Even with the high proportion of youth incarcerated for status offenses, Kentucky is making progress. After increasing from 2003 to 2007, the number of youth incarcerated for status offenses dropped by 41 percent between 2007 and 2011. The decrease is likely due to increased community awareness about

the high cost and ineffectiveness of incarcerating youth, the leadership of judges, and the work of advocates to both stand up for individual youth and make changes to the system.



Source: Data collected by Department of Juvenile Justice.

Kentucky counties vary in their use of incarceration for youth who commit status offenses. Clark, Kenton, and Knox Counties had the highest rates of youth booked for status offenses in 2011. Yet, Kenton County's numbers have shown improvement in the last year; Kenton and McCracken Counties showed the greatest drop in the number of bookings from 2010 to 2011 with a decline of 39 bookings each.

"In response to having the highest number of incarcerations in Kenton County in 2010, Kenton County judges Chris Mehling and Judge Lisa Bushelman have begun taking action that more effectively addresses status offense behavior" said Joshua Crabtree, Managing Attorney for Children's Law Center. "They have convened a community work team and have started making changes in their practice as well. Already, their work is showing results."

An overreliance on incarceration as a response to child misbehavior costs the community, both in terms of safety and economics. The estimated annual cost to incarcerate one child in a juvenile detention facility in Kentucky is \$76,600. On the other hand, investing in programs that set youth up to succeed are much less costly and more effective. For example, one year of an afterschool program for an at-risk child costs just \$3,800.

Additionally, researchers have found that incarcerating youth for minor things can actually raise the likelihood that they will engage in criminal activity after being released. In the interest of public

safety, youth should not be locked up for minor offenses, let alone for things like missing school or running away.

Appropriate and consistently-applied discipline that gets at the root of the reason for non-criminal misbehaviors ensures that youth have opportunities to learn from their mistakes. Alternatives to incarceration will save tax dollars by cutting the day-to-day costs of locking youth up. They also bring the potential for long-term savings as fewer juveniles would be entering into the adult criminal justice system, and fewer juveniles would be at risk of the poor educational and employment outcomes associated with incarceration.

Kentucky has utilized a number of effective approaches in addressing status offenses while reducing repeat misbehavior. These efforts range from working preventatively to address problems before youth must be referred to the juvenile justice system, to helping youth already charged with offenses address underlying problems at home or at school. But more work is needed. Advocates are asking state leaders to create the structure for communities to tackle this issue effectively and in a cost-efficient way. Rather than spending money on costly and ineffective incarceration, Kentucky communities need additional proven diversion programs and alternatives to detention for holding youth accountable.

Legislative changes also play a key role in shifting Kentucky away from using incarceration for status offenses. During the 2012 session, the General Assembly approved the creation of the Unified Juvenile Code Task Force with one of the charges being to study how status offenses are handled.

“We are encouraged that the state legislature has recognized the need to tackle this problem by appointing a juvenile justice taskforce,” said Brooks. “The status quo of locking up youth for things that aren’t crimes for adults isn’t just ineffective and costly, but it’s bad for long-term public safety. We encourage the taskforce to create a statutory framework that allows and encourages communities to effectively address youth misbehavior without the use of jail time.”

See Kentucky’s Youth Advocates’ new report, [*Ending the Use of Incarceration for Status Offenses in Kentucky*](#) online [here](#).

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Kentucky Youth Advocates is a non-partisan, non-profit, children's advocacy organization. KYA represents a voice for Kentucky's most precious asset – its youth. We believe that Kentucky's youth deserve the opportunities and resources necessary to ensure their productive development and health.