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## Editorial: Find better ways to keep kids out of jail

Diverting youth from detention produces better outcomes.

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For most schoolkids, detention means a trip to the principal's office and a timeout in study hall. But for young people on the wrong side of the law, detention is the underage version of going to jail.

The practice of sending kids to lockup grew during the 1990s as fear of youth mounted and more children were certified as adults for violent crimes. Today, despite the lowest youth crime rates in a generation, hundreds of thousands of children and teens are confined annually in the United States' 600 secure detention centers.

Yet when it comes to lower-level, nonviolent offenders, research shows that jail isn't the best option. Three metro area counties are wisely steering away from detention by using the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiatives (JDAI) model. Promoted nationally by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the idea is to do a better job of evaluating which kids are truly dangerous or are flight risks.

Rather than routinely sending kids to jail, county

juvenile workers can send teens home under house arrest or divert them to community-based services or day treatment or education programs.

The foundation started three pilot programs nearly 20 years ago. Today the approach is being used at more than 100 sites in 25 states, and it should become standard corrections procedure. A recent Casey review found that the strategy reduced detention center numbers by an average of 25 percent.

In Minnesota, Ramsey County recently reported that four years ago an average of 89 young people were in lockup daily; today that number is down to 38 -- a drop of 57 percent. Hennepin and Dakota counties recorded 33 percent declines during the same period. Most of the youth are picked up for minor offenses such as truancy, curfew violations, theft and lower-level assaults.

Decreasing the number of young detainees in Ramsey allowed the county to close one wing of a detention center, saving an estimated \$250,000 annually. Those funds can be better used to help turns kids' lives around.

Nationally, according to a Justice Policy Institute report, states spend about \$5.7 billion each year imprisoning youth primarily for nonviolent offenses. The study concludes that most of them could be handled safely through a variety of more cost-effective alternatives that return up to \$13 in benefits for every \$1 spent.

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Ramsey County Attorney Susan Gaertner points out that the savings are welcome, but counties must be willing to invest in good alternatives. Diverting kids out of lockup can't work if they aren't channeled into effective educational or other settings. Those options keep kids out the juvenile justice system and improve their chances for success, leading to lower crime rates and improved public safety.

In fact, recent research found that prior commitment is a greater predictor of getting locked into the system than family problems, gang membership or carrying a weapon. Confining troubled youth together is more harmful than helpful; long stretches of detention can be like criminal college for teens.

In the Twin Cities and around the nation, the JDAI strategy is keeping more kids out of jail, thus improving their chances for a brighter future. That's good for the young offenders and ultimately good for our communities.

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