Study: Youth Detention Decreases Amid COVID-19

The Annie E. Casey Foundation survey covered Jan. 1 to Apr. 1, and shows a 24% reduction in youth detention, a decrease as large as the entire national decline from 2010 to 2017. (Pixabay)

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. – As the new coronavirus began to spread around the United States, the population in juvenile detention centers in Florida and much of the country dropped by about one-quarter, according to a new survey.

It's a snapshot of agencies in 30 states, and found a steep decline in the rate of admissions, with an average of 171 young people per day not entering the detention system.
Mary Marx, president and CEO of PACE Center for Girls -- which has 21 centers across Florida for at-risk teens -- says she anticipated the decline and contacted the state about all the options instead of confinement.

"So we said, we understand that you're probably going to see a drop, and that we can help," says Marx. "I mean, we are providing tele-mental health, tele-counseling, and tele-therapy to all of the girls that PACE works with. So, there is an opportunity for some of those referrals to start coming to us."

Response to the survey varied by state. Marx thinks Florida has done a good job of using alternatives -- like civil citations and diversions -- rather than detention, but says more can be done.

Florida's Department of Juvenile Justice has only confirmed 18 staffers and 4 youths who've tested positive for COVID-19, but critics say the agency isn't being transparent.

The survey was conducted by the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI). The Director of the foundation's Juvenile Justice Strategy Group, Nate Balis, says he thinks the trend of sending fewer young people to detention centers proves there are plenty of alternatives.

"Maybe we are finally really 'right-sizing' juvenile detention in this country," says Balis. "We could emerge from the pandemic with a detention population that truly is young people who pose an immediate community safety risk, rather than all kinds of young people who are not a risk to public safety."

Balis is encouraging states to start sending more resources to programs and service providers that can help keep nonviolent youth out of confinement.

The survey was conducted with the Pretrial Justice Institute and Empact Solutions. They collected data from systems that held more than 3,700 young people in secure detention on March 1.

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