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Baton Rouge, LA – The Advocate
La. juvenile incarceration rates fall, report says**

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Louisiana was among 44 states that saw decreases in their youth incarceration rates between 1997 and 2010, according to a report released Wednesday by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Louisiana's 56 percent reduction in its youth incarceration rate was one of the most dramatic improvements in the country, the report states.

Only Tennessee, Connecticut and Arizona experienced larger declines during the time period, according to the report that the Baltimore-based foundation called a "snapshot."

"For me, the other Kids Count reports usually show Louisiana ranked at the bottom. It's good to see this is an area where Louisiana is making progress," said Teresa Falgoust, Kids Count Coordinator in Louisiana.

The report, called "Reducing Youth Incarceration in the United States," stated Louisiana had the nation's highest youth incarceration rate in 1996 with 549 criminal offenders — under age 21 who were confined because of an offense — per 100,000 youngsters.

The report used data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

In 2010, the youth incarceration rate dropped to 239 offenders per 100,000 young people.

That ranks Louisiana as having the 18th highest rate of any state, according to the report.

The reason for the decline is the state's continued efforts over the past decade to better screen youthful offenders, Falgoust said.

The state now uses more objective data to determine how to punish youthful offenders, rather than relying solely on law enforcement authorities who have to follow laws aimed at adults, Falgoust said.

"Evidence-based assessment" allows local authorities to better screen those offenders who are a threat to public safety. Dangerous offenders should be incarcerated, she said, but most young people can be rehabilitated and become productive adults. In addition to being expensive, incarceration produces worse outcomes for youthful offenders, she said.

Many studies show that children develop and can mature past bad decisions, if treated rather than thrown in a juvenile prison, Falgoust said.

“Locking up young people has lifelong consequences, as incarcerated youth experience lower educational achievement, more unemployment, higher alcohol and substance abuse rates and greater chances of run-ins with the law as adults,” said Bart Lubow, director of the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Juvenile Justice Strategy Group.

America’s rate of locking up young people has dropped by more than 40 percent over a 15-year period, with no decrease in public safety, according to a new report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation in Baltimore.

Nationally, juvenile lockups peaked in 1995, with 105,055 youngsters behind bars on a single day, the report showed. By 2010, the number of incarcerated youth had dropped to 70,792 on a comparable day. Over the same period, the detention rate dropped from 350 to 225 per 100,000 youths, the report stated.

Louisiana’s incarceration rates are still higher than the national average, said Anthony Recasner, chief executive officer of Agenda for Children, a New Orleans-based organization funded with grants and contracted to provide data and services for children in Louisiana.

“As a state, we need to celebrate our successes, while also recognizing that Louisiana still has room for improvement,” Recasner said in a prepared statement. He added that Gov. Bobby Jindal’s proposals to expand drug courts and move certain nonviolent drug offenders into treatment programs would help further reduce youth incarceration rates in Louisiana.

Jindal’s plan will be included in bills submitted to the Legislature, which begins its regular session on April 8.

Louisiana has grappled with juvenile justice issues for years. Jindal said when announcing the proposals on Feb. 15 that the state spends \$12.5 million for 500 drug-related offenders with a five-year sentence and a recidivism rate — those who return to jail — of 30 percent.