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Study calls juvenile lockups the worst place for some kids

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Jailing juvenile suspects who are waiting for court dates can increase their likelihood of committing future offenses compared to those who are placed in treatment or not detained at all, according to a new study being released today.

The Washington, D.C.-based Justice Policy Institute also found that youths held in detention centers are more likely to attempt suicide, get hooked on drugs, have trouble staying in school and earn less later in life than those released pending their court appearances.

"Detention has a profoundly negative impact on young people's mental and physical well-being," the institute notes in the study. "Instead of reducing crime, the act of incarcerating high numbers of youth may in fact facilitate increased crime."

The study, to be presented today at a conference in New Orleans, relies on existing literature and reports from detention centers around the country to draw its conclusions. It comes as New Jersey continues to search for ways to reduce overcrowding in county-run youth detention centers.

Those centers are supposed to be places of last resort for youths who have been arrested and are at risk of harming people or skipping court. But the state acknowledged three years ago as part of a federal settlement that the centers had become warehouses for youths with mental illnesses, drug addictions and behavioral problems waiting for openings at treatment facilities. Just as troubling, the centers were housing a disproportionate number of minorities.

Looking to overhaul the system, the state Juvenile Justice Commission teamed up with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a Baltimore children's philanthropic group, to determine why more than half of the 17 detention centers were over capacity and to find ways to steer youths elsewhere.

"We were really concerned about the overcrowding of the juvenile detention centers, particularly in Camden and Essex," said Howard Beyer, executive director of the state Juvenile Justice Commission, which monitors the facilities. "We really wanted to change the way we were doing business."

In April 2004, the state and five counties began implementing the foundation's Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative, which stresses the use of objective criteria to make decisions on which youths are detained, Beyer said. The program also encourages the expansion of alternative treatments so released youths get needed services, and the use of standardized data to quickly identify system-wide problems.

Since adopting the reforms, the five counties, including Essex and Monmouth, have reduced the daily population in their juvenile detention centers by 43 percent. Five others, including Mercer and Union, are expected to adopt the initiative early next year.

"In a short time, New Jersey counties have taken big steps to reform juvenile detention," Beyer said. "We are confident we will continue to make important changes as well as double our efforts across the state."

The Justice Policy Institute study found that many of the country's 769 detention centers routinely house

youths who should be released pending trial, particularly minorities. In 2003, black youths were more than four times as likely to be held as whites, while Hispanic youths were twice as likely to be held as whites.

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