

## Reports: Florida, Collier, Lee seeing fewer juvenile offenders

By AISLING SWIFT

Wednesday, February 27, 2013

NAPLES — The number of youths serving time behind bars in Florida dropped 32 percent between 1995 and 2010, a decline that's continued in recent years, a report being released today says.

"Reducing Youth Incarceration in the U.S.," a report by Baltimore-based Annie E. Casey Foundation, shows fewer Florida inmates under age 21 were incarcerated after sentencing during that period — 386 youths per 100,000 compared with 261 in 2010.

Florida trailed 26 other states, with Tennessee, Connecticut and West Virginia topping the list. Their decreases ranged from 66 percent to 60 percent.

However, the drop in Florida in the past five years was dramatic, 44 percent, according to the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. In Collier and Lee, agency figures show, there was a 34 percent decline in youths detained after sentencing — from 97 to 64 in Collier and from 182 to 120 in Lee.

Florida Department of Juvenile Justice Secretary Wansley Walters said the Casey report shows the state is on the right track.

"In addition to the significant decrease in youth incarceration rates documented in this snapshot, Florida has seen a drastic reduction in overall juvenile arrests, school-based delinquency and the number of youth being transferred to the adult prison system," Walters said.

About 44 percent fewer youth cases were transferred to adult court since fiscal 2007-08, according to department figures, which showed a 14 percent drop last fiscal year.

"This is important because we know that unnecessarily placing youth in adult prison can do more harm than help," Walters said.

Last fiscal year, delinquency arrests handled by the state juvenile justice department decreased to 29,384 from 45,242 five years ago. Murder and manslaughter arrests decreased 49 percent, from 126 to 64, while attempted-murder arrests fell 42 percent, from 67 to 39.

Other felony arrests, including aggravated sexual battery, aggravated assault and

battery, dropped 50 percent to 18 percent, with auto theft and armed robbery topping the list with decreases of 48 percent and 35 percent, respectively.

In 2008, more than 51,000 youths were admitted to secure detention centers, a number that shrank 33 percent to 34,209 last fiscal year. Incidents of school delinquency also fell dramatically, by 50 percent over the past eight years.

Walters called that a victory not only for her department, but for parents, educators, law enforcement, the court system, community leaders and youths.

“We are constantly developing new partnerships and looking for ways to identify at-risk (children) before they get in trouble, as well as helping those who are already in the system avoid getting any deeper,” she said.

Among alternatives for Collier’s young offenders is DRILL Academy — Discipline, Respect, Integrity, Learning and Leadership — a military-style camp that enables teenage boys to continue school.

Another option is teen court, a first-time offender program brought here in 1999 by Collier Circuit Judge Frank Baker, who just retired. Punishment is meted out by peers, with middle and high school students playing the roles of prosecutors, defense attorneys, bailiffs and jurors.



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