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MISSISSIPPI KIDS COUNT

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Youth Incarceration Sees Significant Drop in Mississippi

Decline signals opportunity for alternative, more effective responses to court-involved youth

(Mississippi State, MS., February 27, 2013)— The rate of locking up young people in trouble with the law 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. From 1997 to 2010, Mississippi dropped 50 percent in the rate of youth confinement.

The KIDS COUNT Data Snapshot indicates the number of youth, nationally, in correctional facilities on a single day peaked at 107,637 in 1995, declining to 105,055 in 1997, to a low of 70,792 in 2010. Mississippi's own numbers echo the national shift, dropping from 756 in 1997 to 357 in 2010. Over the same period, the rate of Mississippi youth confinement dropped from 210 per 100,000 youth to 105 per 100,000. This downward trend, revealed in data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, has accelerated in recent years.

Despite the decline, the United States still leads the industrialized world in locking up its young people, and holds the majority of its incarcerated youth for nonviolent offenses—such as truancy, low-level property offenses and technical probation violations—that are not clear public-safety threats.

“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 Foundation’s Juvenile Justice Strategy Group. “Our decreasing reliance on incarceration presents an exceptional opportunity to respond to juvenile delinquency in a more cost-effective and humane way—and to give these youth a real chance to turn themselves around.”

The snapshot, which follows the Foundation’s 2011 report *No Place for Kids: The Case for Reducing Juvenile Incarceration*, indicates most states and the District of Columbia mirrored the national decline, according to data from the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Mississippi is one of a small collection of states that halved their youth incarceration rates.

Although the nation’s five largest racial groups also saw decreasing numbers among their ranks, the data show the justice system still treats youth of color more severely. African Americans are nearly five times as likely to be locked up as their white counterparts, and Latinos and American Indians are two to three times as likely.

The *KIDS COUNT Data Snapshot* suggests several ways to continue promoting less reliance on incarceration and improve the odds for young people involved in the justice system. These include restricting incarceration to youth posing a clear risk to public safety; investing in alternatives that effectively supervise, sanction and treat youth in their homes and communities; and encouraging states—which often have financial incentives to fall back on incarceration—to seek community-based alternatives to locking up kids.

In 2012, Mississippi passed Senate Bill 2598 and established the Juvenile Detention and Alternatives Task Force. The purpose of the task force is to support the expansion of juvenile detention alternatives and recommend licensing standards for juvenile detention facilities throughout the state.

“The Task Force is one of many strategies we are establishing in the state to improve the conditions of confinement and reduce the number of youth incarcerated for nonviolent, low-level offenses,” said Dr. Angela Robertson, research professor at Mississippi State University’s Social Science Research Center and Advisory Group member for the Juvenile Detention and Alternative Task Force. “We are actively reviewing juvenile detention standards from other states and will make recommendations to the State Legislature.”

Also Mississippi’s Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative originally funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2008, has grown from three to five counties and is funded through a Juvenile Accountability Block Grant by the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention. Participating five counties include: Adams, Leflore, Washington, Rankin and Harrison.

“The importance of promoting evidence-based strategies, in working with youth cannot be overstated,” said Dr. Linda H. Southward, Director of Mississippi KIDS COUNT. “Implementing policies and programs based upon the evidence of what works, will result in successful outcomes for youth, families, and communities.”

The new snapshot features the latest data for states, the District of Columbia and the nation, as does the KIDS COUNT Data Center, home to comprehensive national, state and local statistics on child well-being. The Data Center allows users to create rankings, maps and graphs for use in publications and on websites, and to view real-time information on mobile devices.

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Mississippi KIDS COUNT is housed within the Family & Children Research Unit (FCRU) at the Social Science Research Center. The program is part of National KIDS COUNT network with grantees working in 50 states and coordinated by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. MS KIDS COUNT provides data, statistics, and original research, about the health, education, safety and well-being of children to policymakers, educators, program administrators, parents, caregivers, advocates and the general public. MS KIDS COUNT also provides an annual forum for interested stakeholders to share challenges and solutions to the problems facing Mississippi’s children and communities. For more information, visit www.ssrc.msstate.edu/mskidscount, Twitter: @mskidscount, and Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/MississippiKidsCount>.