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EDITORIAL

Some Progress on Kids and Jails

The number of minors being held in adult jails and prisons in this country has dropped substantially, according to a new study based on federal data. That's welcome news. Criminologists warn that juvenile offenders who are thrown in with adult prisoners are exposed to social pressures and develop personal contacts that make it far more likely that they will become career criminals than those held in juvenile facilities.

The study, by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, a California-based nonprofit, shows that the number of minors being held in adult facilities has decreased by 38 percent since 1999. Because of reductions in juvenile crime and arrests, among other factors, the number of children held in juvenile facilities also fell.

Congress can consolidate these gains by using aid to impose a clear federal standard: To qualify for federal juvenile-justice funds, states should have to certify that people under 18 are not being jailed as adults, except in cases involving heinous crimes like rape and murder.

Unfortunately, not all of the new data is encouraging. States still seem to be holding in juvenile facilities a great many children who should instead be treated in therapeutic programs near their homes and families. Children with drug or alcohol problems should be in treatment programs, not juvenile lockups. Therapeutic programs can turn young lives around and reduce crime. Because incarceration is so costly, these programs can more than pay for themselves.

The data also show that too many children are still being confined for minor offenses like truancy, which should be dealt with through community-based programs. Putting truants into juvenile facilities makes it more likely that they will repeatedly return to custody and become permanently entangled in the system. Congress, which tried to end this practice with the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974, should close the loophole that allows states to continue to confining truants.

Another cause for concern is the significant racial and ethnic disparities that show up in juvenile justice data. The decline in the juvenile custody rate was significantly greater for whites than for African-Americans, who account for less than 15 percent of the youth population but nearly 40 percent of those in confinement.

The states and the federal government need to pay more attention to these disparities so all young people can benefit from advances in how juvenile offenders are handled by the criminal justice system.