

U.S. News & World Report

What Youth Incarceration Costs Taxpayers

A new report finds jailing young people costs state and local governments as much as \$21 billion annually.



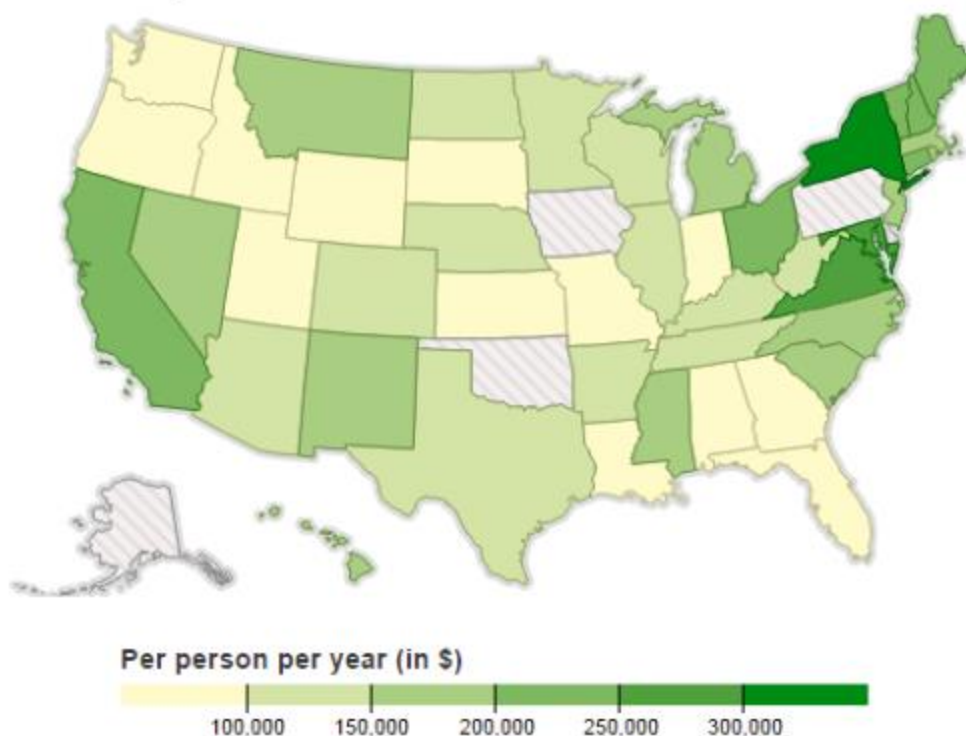
Keeping America's youth incarcerated comes with a large price tag.

By [Tierney Sneed](#) Dec. 9, 2014 | 12:01 a.m. EST

When youths pay for crime by being incarcerated, taxpayers, too, bear some of the burden. Locking up a juvenile costs states an average of \$407.58 per person per day and \$148,767 per person per year when the most expensive option is used, according to a new report [by the Justice Policy Institute](#). As the country debates [the cost-effectiveness of mass incarceration](#), the report notes that jailing youths carries its own exorbitant price tag.

The Justice Policy Institute surveyed 46 states, looking at what governments spent on confining young people.

What States Pay to Confine a Juvenile



Source: [Justice Policy Institute](#) [Get the data](#)

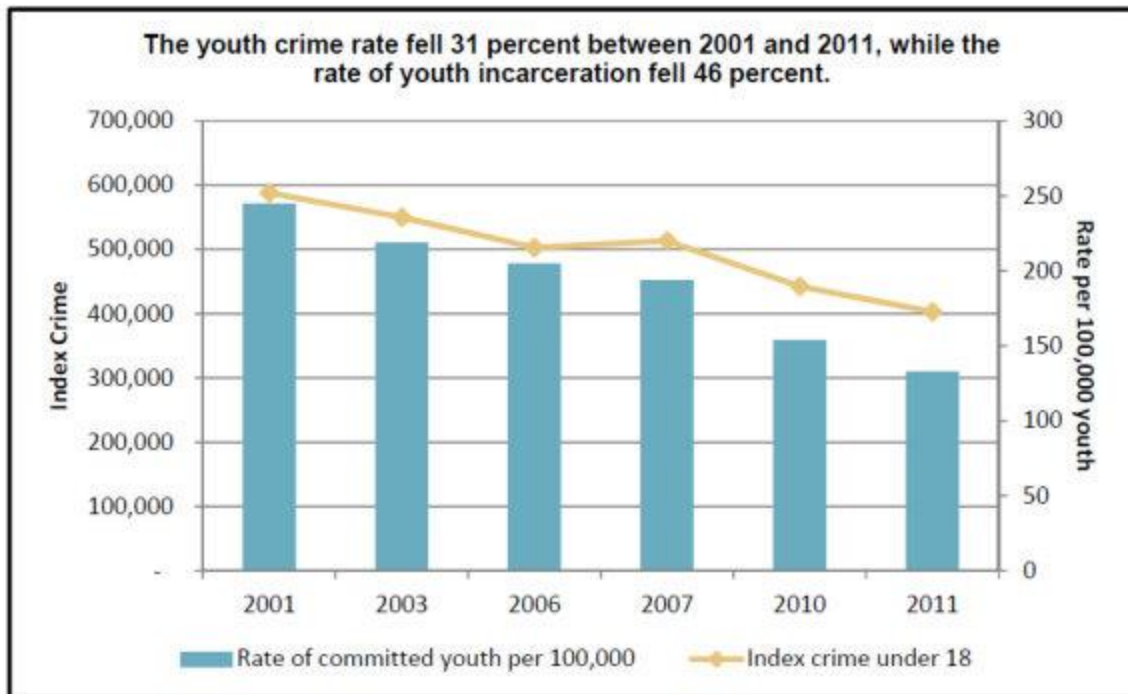
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A Justice Policy Institute report identifies what youth incarceration is costing states.

Many states have implemented measures to decrease their youth incarceration rates, and overall, the number of young people that were committed to confinement shrunk by 45 percent between 2001 and 2011. Hawaii recently enacted a justice reform bill it expects will cut the state's confined youth population by half, while Georgia and Kentucky also retooled the way their justice systems treat youths, with approaches expected to save taxpayers millions of dollars.

(Some states, like New York, saw per-youth incarceration costs rise as their populations declined but resources were used less efficiently.)

Sending fewer young people to prison has not had the effect of raising youth crime; rather, the youth crime rate also has dropped.



Arrests source: Puzzanchera, C. and Kang, W. (2014). "Easy Access to FBI Arrest Statistics 1994-2011." Online. Available: www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezaucr/. **Residential placement source:** Sickmund, M., Sladky, T.J., Kang, W., and Puzzanchera, C. (2013). "Easy Access to the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement." Online. Available: <http://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezacjrp/> Note: Index crimes include arrests of youth under 18. Youth in residential placement include youth under 21.

The youth incarceration rate has dropped, as has youth crime.

Aside from the direct costs of incarcerating juveniles – such as the funds required for operating detention facilities – taxpayers pay in the long term as well in the form of lost future earnings, lost tax revenue and other ripple effects that the Justice Policy Institute estimates costs state and local governments nationwide somewhere between \$8 billion and \$21 billion annually.

Research varies as to whether incarcerating young people makes them more likely to commit crimes in the future, [but one study](#) found that juvenile incarceration increases a person's chances of going to jail again by 22 to 26 percent.

Furthermore, young people who go to prison are less likely to graduate high school, [according to a 2008 analysis](#), by as much as 26 percent.

The difference in the median salary of a high school graduate versus a non-high school graduate amounts to \$630,000 over a person's lifetime, [according to the U.S. Labor Department Statistics](#).

On Monday, the U.S. Justice and Education departments [sent letters](#) to state correctional education officials reminding them of their responsibilities to educate all young people in correctional facilities regardless of race, color, national origin, sex, religion or disability. A 2013 Rand Corp. study showed when prisoners participated in educational or vocational programs, their probability of returning to prison decreased by 43 percent.

In addition to improving educational opportunities within juvenile prisons, the Justice Policy Institute recommends states look into policy reforms that would limit the number of youths in correctional facilities in the first place.

Those efforts could include reconsidering mandatory sentencing policies and shifting funding toward options that involve home or community-based supervision of convicted youths, particularly as 62 percent of the young people in confinement in 2011 had committed nonviolent offenses.