

Cash-strapped states cut juvenile justice programs

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By JIM DAVENPORT, Associated Press Writer Fri Dec 26, 12:39 pm ET

COLUMBIA, S.C. — State budget cuts are forcing some of the nation's youngest criminals out of counseling programs and group homes and into juvenile prisons in what critics contend is a shortsighted move that will eventually lead to more crime and higher costs.

Tennessee, South Carolina, Kentucky and Virginia are among states that have slashed juvenile justice spending — in some cases more than 20 percent — because of slumping tax collections. Youth advocates say they expect the recession will bring more cuts next year in other states, hitting programs that try to rehabilitate children rather than simply locking them up.

"If you raise a child in prison, you're going to raise a convict," said South Carolina Juvenile Justice Director Bill Byars, credited with turning around a system once better known for warehousing children than counseling them and teaching them life skills.

Now, he's been asked to draw up plans to trim an additional 15 percent from a juvenile justice budget already cut \$23 million, or 20 percent, since June as part of the state's effort to pare \$1 billion from its \$7 billion budget.

All five of the system's group homes — which generally house less-violent offenders and give them more individual attention — have been shuttered. Also gone are some intensive youth reform and after-school programs in detention facilities.

The story is similar in other states. Kentucky is nixing a boot camp-style program developed by the National Guard. Virginia is losing behavioral services staff and a facility that prepares children to go home after serving time, along with smaller camps and community programs. Juveniles in those programs will return to traditional correctional facilities.

"It's not like we're going to say, 'OK, let's close a juvenile detention center,' or something like that," said Gordon Hickey, spokesman for Virginia Gov. Timothy M. Kaine. "We have to reduce spending across the state, and the governor looked at suggestions and recommendations from all departments. He certainly realizes that all of these reductions have consequences. The idea is to limit the damage as much as possible."

Among the programs being cut in South Carolina is one that Lex Wilbanks, an 18-year-old arrested four years ago on drug and gun charges, credits with giving him back his future.

Before moving to the program run by Florida-based nonprofit Associated Marine Institute, which provides intensive counseling and wilderness camps in several states, Wilbanks spent four months in a regular juvenile detention center.

"When you did something wrong or you fight or you disrespect staff, they just throw you into lockdown," Wilbanks said. "They just throw you in and make them fight to survive. You're just making them a hardened criminal."

In South Carolina, only 22 percent of offenders who go through the institute's program later break the law, less than half the recidivism rate for juveniles in large state facilities, Byars said.

Through the program, Wilbanks worked his way to the top rank in Army Junior ROTC and earned a GED and college credits. Acting up brought meetings during which counselors "talk you through problems and how you can actually change," he said. "It gives you hope."

Florida is also axing three Associated Marine Institute programs to save \$1.7 million, part of an effort to cut 4 percent, or \$18 million, from the juvenile justice budget. Advocates are bracing for additional cuts as legislators go back to the Capitol in January to deal with a \$2 billion state budget hole.

Florida's juvenile justice system "is going to die the death of a million 4 percent cuts," said Jacqui Colyer, who leads a state juvenile justice advisory group.

The picture isn't as bleak everywhere. In New York, where the population of jailed juveniles has declined as the state moves toward a more community-based approach, Gov. David Patterson has proposed closing six youth facilities and consolidating and downsizing others that aren't being fully used to save \$12 million in 2009-10 and \$14 million in 2010-11.

A court order limits the cuts California can make and Minnesota, Massachusetts and Nebraska haven't made serious cuts to their systems. Other states, including Connecticut, Oregon, New Hampshire and Utah, are making more modest cuts or delaying planned spending.

Advocates say they worry most about losing programs, such as group homes, that take children out of large facilities to give them individual attention.

Juvenile facilities see an array of major and minor criminals. Gun, drug, sex and assault offenders may share sleeping quarters and classes with teen pranksters sentenced for disrupting schools or destroying property. Terms can last weeks or, in extreme cases, until

youths become adults and are transferred to adult prisons.

Generally, less violent offenders make it to the smaller group homes, and experts say social pecking orders are easier to defuse in those settings compared to prisons where gangs try to form and fight for control.

Sheila Bedi, executive director of the Washington-based Justice Policy Institute, said housing children can cost as much as \$600 per child daily. But the expenses can be much higher when children emerge hardened from big youth prisons, commit more crimes and end up in adult facilities.

"The truant comes out learning how to steal a car," Bedi said. "You cannot expect a child to come out of that situation with the ability to make better life decisions."

Associated Press Writer Dena Potter in Richmond, Va., contributed to this report.

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