

## Comprehensive Juvenile Justice Reform: Cutting Costs, Saving Lives



by Marc Levin, Director, Center for Effective Justice & Jeanette Moll, Policy Analyst, Center for Effective Justice

From 2007 to 2011, the Texas juvenile justice system experienced major transformations, as a crisis became the impetus for significant policy reforms. Immediately prior to the 2007 legislative session, state policymakers learned that Texas youths were frequently being abused in state juvenile lockups. This led lawmakers to enact sweeping reforms that same year, followed by complementary changes in 2009 and 2011. These initiatives have contributed to a historic decline in the state's youth incarceration rate, during the same period that crime rates fell to their lowest levels since 1973. The much smaller number of youths that still remain in state facilities are now safer and have access to more effective programming, and verified abuse complaints have fallen 69.5 percent from 2008 to 2011.

### Protecting Juveniles

Upon exposure of abuses in state juvenile lockups, Texas officials took action to redress the wrongs and establish protections for juvenile offenders. The Texas Public Policy Foundation was called upon to help lawmakers draft Senate Bill 103 in 2007, which the Legislature overwhelmingly passed and Governor Rick Perry signed into law. The governor had earlier designated reforming Texas Youth Commission (TYC), the agency that runs juvenile lockups, among his emergency items for urgent legislative action at the beginning of the session.

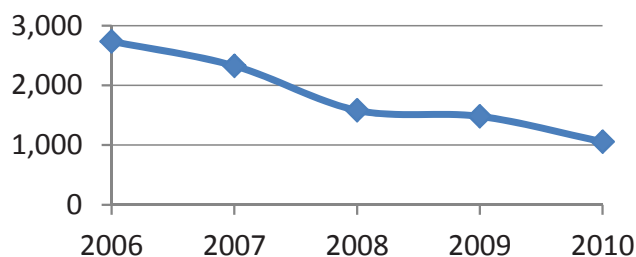
Senate Bill 103 contained numerous significant reforms to protect youths. First, the legislation called for the installation of video cameras in TYC facilities to monitor staff treatment of committed youth, and it established an inspector general's office at TYC. The inspector general investigates crimes committed by a TYC employee, or at a facility operated by or under contract with TYC, and reports to TYC's board to ensure maximum oversight. Second, a Special Prosecution Unit was established to work with the inspector general and district attorneys to prosecute crimes within TYC. These reforms promoted speedy, objective investigations by qualified personnel not beholden to internal agency prerogatives.

### A New Era of Cost-Efficient and Effective Juvenile Justice

Juvenile justice reform in Texas went beyond addressing abuse, however. Texas took the opportunity to fundamentally reform and reshape the entire juvenile justice system. In the last few years, Texas has moved away from an overemphasis on incarcerating less serious youth offenders in remotely located state lockups and towards evidence-based, cost-efficient, and effective community corrections programs.

Senate Bill 103 also barred further commitment of misdemeanants to TYC, finding that offenders guilty of low-level crimes such as graffiti and minor in possession of alcohol need not be incarcerated alongside violent offenders at TYC facilities. The inefficiency of doing so had become clear: as of 2007, TYC had a 49 percent three-year re-incarceration rate (which, post-reform, is now 35.7 percent), while costing more than \$100,000 per youth, per year.

### New Commitments to TYC

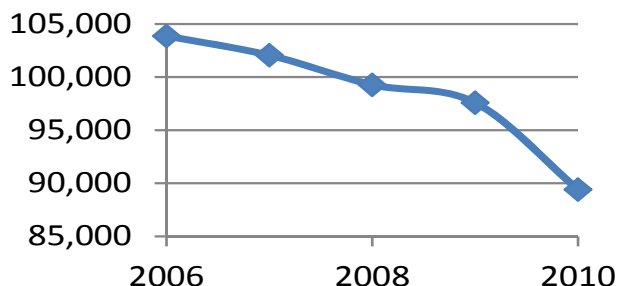


Source: Texas Youth Commission

In 2009, the Texas Legislature included a rider in the budget act which authorized the Texas Juvenile Probation Commission (TJPC) to fund grants to local juvenile probation departments that pledged to reduce commitments to TYC through the diversion of suitable juvenile offenders to community-based treatment and vocational programs. These programs are funded only if past evidence from other jurisdictions and

ongoing results demonstrate a reduction in recidivism. These programs were statutorily required to cost less than half of the per-day cost of the state lockup.

### Formal Referrals to TJPC



Source: Texas Juvenile Probation Commission

As a result of these changes, state incarceration of juveniles plummeted to record lows, and is now reserved for offenders who pose a risk to public safety. This saves taxpayer dollars and achieves better results by keeping more youths closer to families, churches, and other sources of community support.

Significantly, lower incarceration rates have not resulted in higher crime rates: in August of 2011, 9.1 percent fewer criminal cases were pending against youths in August 2011 as compared with August 2007, and the juvenile arrest rate has fallen substantially from 2007 to 2009, the most recent year reported.

Thanks in large part to these positive changes, this year, Texas lawmakers closed three youth prisons, accounting for most of the \$117 million in budget savings at TYC in this biennium. Furthermore, a transition team is currently working to consolidate the two state agencies responsible for juvenile justice, which is projected to result in millions of dollars in savings from efficiencies realized in the 2012-13 biennium.

These reforms show that Texas' juvenile justice system is far removed from its past; even *The New York Times* has recognized Texas' reform efforts, calling them "impressive strides." While Texas must continue to improve its juvenile justice policies, it is clear that the fast pace of positive change over the last several years serves as a model for reformers across the nation. ★

Note: Sources are hyperlinked in online version at [www.texaspolicy.com](http://www.texaspolicy.com).

