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## **Report finds youth incarceration on steep decline in Md., U.S.**

By [Justin Fenton](#), The Baltimore Sun

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The rate of youth confinement in Maryland declined by nearly half over a 13-year period, outpacing the national average amid a "sea change" in the approach toward dealing with young people who break the law, according to a report released by a national youth advocacy group.

From 1997 to 2010, the rate of youth incarceration dropped 37 percent, according to the Baltimore-based Annie E. Casey Foundation. The group noted that the United States leads the industrialized world in locking up young people, and said that the majority of incarcerated youths are held for nonviolent offenses such as truancy and low-level property crime.

Just 14 percent of youths held in detention facilities in 2012 were being held for a crime of violence, while 65 percent were held for misdemeanors, according to data from the state Department of Juvenile Services.

Still, the downward trend in youth 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 their lives around," Bart Lubow, director of the Casey Foundation's Juvenile Justice Strategy Group, said in a statement.

In Maryland, youth advocates are pushing for legislation aimed at reducing the use of secure detention in juvenile facilities and limiting the circumstances under which youths with very minor offenses can be sent to long-term juvenile facilities. Since 2010, the last year covered by the Casey report, detention placements in Maryland have declined an additional 8 percent, according to the Department of Juvenile Services.

Angela Johnese, juvenile justice policy director for Advocates for Children and Youth, said the decline in incarceration has not led to any increase in crime rates. Youth arrests have been declining, and in the past fiscal year there was an 11 percent decrease in re-arrests for juvenile offenders, she said.

"Hopefully, the data in this report will spur lawmakers to pass pending legislation that ensures that youth are in the setting most likely to provide the services they need to stay out of trouble and be successful," Sonia Kumar, an attorney directing the Maryland ACLU's Juvenile Justice Initiative, said in a statement.

The Casey Foundation said that the reasons for the nationwide decline are not based on a national policy shift, but on "idiosyncratic policy changes within states, often prompted by lawsuits," shrinking budgets, and shifts in leadership.

The organization said states should continue to limit eligibility for correctional placement to prohibit commitments for less-serious offenses and invest in alternatives to incarceration, among other changes.

In a statement, Maryland officials credited declines here "to many reform efforts, including more effective law enforcement practices," as well as efforts to keep more youths in treatment near where they live.

States vary in their approach toward juvenile justice, but data compiled by the Casey Foundation show that Maryland's incarceration rate ranks among the lowest, with a rate of 143 confined youths per 100,000 people. The highest state was South Dakota, with a rate of 575 confined youths per 100,000 people; the national average was 225 per 100,000.

In some states, the rate of youth incarceration actually increased — including neighboring Pennsylvania (7 percent increase) and West Virginia (60 percent). Delaware saw a decrease of 29 percent, while Virginia declined 42 percent.

The national report shows that there are large disparities in confinement among racial groups. While the largest five groups all declined — with the biggest drop occurring among Asian and Latino youth — African-American youths are nearly five times more likely to be confined than whites, the report shows.

Data from the state Department of Juvenile Services show that in Maryland, 80 percent of confined youth were black, compared with 15 percent who were white.

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