

By Aaron Leclair for the [Laramie Boomerang](#)

A new report about juvenile justice shows Wyoming incarcerates youth at a higher rate than any other state in the country.

The Anne E. Casey Foundation released its new report, “No Place for Kids: The Case of Reducing Juvenile Incarceration,” on Tuesday.

The report, which compiles more than a decade of juvenile justice research, shows that locking up youth doesn’t prevent future criminal acts, is much more costly than small-oriented treatment programs and exposes youth to violence and abuse.

“Locking kids up doesn’t promote public safety as we think it would,” Wyoming Kids Count Director Marc Homer said on Wednesday.

The reports shows Wyoming incarcerated 395 per 100,000 youth in 2007, which was tops in the country.

South Dakota — the state with the second-highest juvenile incarceration rate — locked up youth at a rate of 348 per 100,000.

The national average was 194 per 100,000 youths being incarcerated in 2007.

Even though the state's rate of juvenile incarceration dropped 14.53 percent from 1997-2007, Homer noted there is still a lot of room for improvement.

"While we saw a drop in that rate from 462 to 395, we still are crowned with the notoriety of being No. 1 in incarcerating youth at a very high rate," he said.

In comparison to Vermont, which the Casey Foundation scores high for child well-being, Wyoming comes up short, Homer said.

While Vermont has a larger population than Wyoming, it has nearly the same number of youth as the Equality State: 128,000 to 132,000.

Yet, Vermont incarcerates 15 youth per year, compared to Wyoming locking up 222 juveniles in 2007, Homer said.

The Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators estimates that Wyoming spent about \$66 million to incarcerate youth in 2008, Homer said.

In comparison, Vermont spends an estimated \$3.5 million per year.

The report also says states should refrain from incarcerating youth for minor and nonviolent offenses.

Homer noted that only 27 percent of youth who are in the juvenile justice system in Wyoming have committed violent crimes.

"Some kids do need secure detention," he said. "The others could be treated differently in their community with a program like Big Brothers Big Sisters."

Homer said alternative programs would save Wyoming millions of dollars by keeping youth out of detention facilities.

Nationwide, states spent between \$66,000 and \$88,000 in 2008 to lock up juveniles, the report says.

“We probably spend more than \$88,000 per year,” Homer said. “We’re spending a lot of money in our state to do things wrong.”

In addition to being costly, incarceration does not rehabilitate youth. The report says 75 percent of juveniles are rearrested within three years of release. The report suggests six steps that states can take to reduce their rate of juvenile incarceration to reduce costs and create better outcomes for youth, some of which are:

- Limiting eligibility for correctional placements.
- Investing in promising nonresidential alternatives.
- Changing the financial incentives for incarcerating youth.
- Adopting best-practice reforms for managing youthful offenders.
- Replacing large correctional institutions with small, treatment-oriented facilities for violent offenders.
- Using data to make youth corrections systems accountable.

The report says violent youthful offenders should be placed in small-oriented treatment facilities like Missouri's Division of Youth Services, which operates secure facilities statewide that house 30-36 juveniles who participate in education, nutrition, treatment and recreation programs.

Homer said the sixth step, using data to make youth corrections systems accountable, is a challenge in Wyoming.

"We're one of 11 states that does not have an evaluation program in place to see if what we're doing is actually producing results," he said. "We can't get recidivism rates in Wyoming. We can only guess."

Homer recommended that Wyoming scale back the incarceration of nonviolent youthful offenders and develop a juvenile court system.

"We put 85 percent or more of kids through adult courts," he said. "They're not dealing with (court) staff who are trained to deal with juveniles."

If state officials are unwilling to take the aforementioned steps, Homer said they should at least develop a statewide juvenile data collection system. For more information about the Casey Foundation's nationwide report on juvenile justice, go to <http://www.aecf.org>.