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Reduce crime and save taxpayer money? Don't arrest kids, study says

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If the goal of the criminal justice system is to maximize public safety, then arresting kids for first-time petty offenses is a bad plan, a new statewide study shows.

REFORM: A study by the youth advocacy group Children's Campaign reported that juvenile civil citations — rather than criminal arrests — lead to better outcomes for at-risk minors.

On the other hand, increasing civil citations would keep thousands from carrying criminal records and, in many cases, from committing future crimes. An added benefit? Tens of millions of taxpayer dollars saved, or recommitted to confront violent crime.



"Stepping Up 2016," a study by the Tallahassee-based advocacy group [The Children's Campaign](#), found that those under 18 who are arrested for minor crimes are twice as likely to re-offend as those issued civil citations and assigned to youth diversion programs.

[Civil citations](#) are an alternative for juveniles with no criminal history who commit common misdemeanors such as underage drinking, possession of marijuana, vandalism and theft.

The study shows that when comparing nine of the most common youth-related offenses, arrests resulted in at least double the recidivism rate for seven of those offenses.

It's expensive in more ways than one.

"Without a doubt, arrests close doors to youth for future education and employment," Roy Miller, president of The Children's Campaign, [said in a statement](#)

"Increasing the use of civil citations up to 75 percent would enable law and order entities to invest up to \$62 million in preventing and addressing felonies and serious crimes, as well as significantly improve life outcomes for nearly 7,000 arrested youth," [author Dewey Caruthers said](#)

Last year, the statewide youth civil citation rate was only 43 percent.

Currently, counties and law enforcement agencies have the discretion to either arrest juveniles who admit to committing a first-time minor offense or issue civil citations. Misdemeanors involving sex or firearms are exempt.

The citations typically involve community service, letters of apology to victims and law enforcement officers, intervention services such as counseling, and assessments to determine if the juvenile is at risk of committing another crime.

But discretion is applied unevenly throughout the state. Two minors who commit the same offense in different geographic areas could receive different punishments — with different long-term consequences.

The study shows that three counties – Duval, Hillsborough and Orange – were responsible for one-quarter of all youth arrests

for common petty crimes last year. The counties represent 18 percent of Florida's population.

Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties represent 30 percent of the state's population, but together comprised less than one-tenth of the state's citation-eligible arrests.

Twenty-one school districts, 13 counties and 150 law enforcement agencies issued no civil citations at all in 2015, and instead relied solely on youth arrests.

An attempt to mandate juvenile civil citations statewide for first-time offenders died in a state legislative committee earlier this year. The bill was sponsored by state Rep. Carlos Trujillo, a conservative Republican from Miami.

The Children's Campaign study stopped short of recommending mandatory juvenile citations. Instead, it calls for documentation and review of all youth arrests, and for offenses committed by younger children to be handled more by parents and schools.

The study further notes that reform in Duval, Hillsborough and Orange counties presents the largest opportunity for change.



Stepping Up 2016 is the second annual comprehensive study on juvenile arrest alternatives in as many years. The effort was sponsored in part by liberal groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union and the Southern Poverty Law Center, and supported by the conservative James Madison Institute.

"Knowing the benefits that an increase in the civil citation utilization provides the families and taxpayers of Florida, we are proud to be a part of "Stepping Up," said Sal Nuzzo, vice president of policy for the James Madison Institute.

"Local leadership can decide what works best for their community as civil citations still hold the juvenile offender accountable for their actions," he said.



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