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Miami-Dade juvenile offenders getting a break



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Finally, a comprehensive study that reveals Miami-Dade is doing something right.

The county is leading the rest of the state in sending teen offenders to diversion programs rather than arresting them for misdemeanor crimes, according to an independent study just released.

This is life-changing news for many. The Miami Herald Editorial Board has long promoted the idea of trying to salvage youth offenders rather than imposing sentences that stigmatizes them.

When translated into reality, the study findings represent a second chance in the lives of hundreds of thousands of teens who run afoul of the law — and are stigmatized with a criminal record, juvenile or otherwise, for the rest of their lives. They are, in consequence, sentenced to a life of menial employment and financial hardship.

But when given a civil citation, young offenders are typically assigned to community service and intervention programs, rather than being arrested and given a criminal record for a misdemeanor, like vandalism or loitering.

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Last year across Miami-Dade, 91 percent of eligible youth were given civil citations instead of facing arrest, that's the highest percentage in the state, according to the nonpartisan "Stepping Up 2016" study. Miami-Dade Police had a 99 percent usage rate for citations, and the school district had a 92 percent rate. They, along with Miami-Dade State Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle, Public Defender Carlos J. Martinez and Schools Superintendent Alberto Carvalho, should be praised for offering an alternative to teen offenders.

The study's findings give encouragement to continue in this path. The report builds upon previous findings that juvenile civil citations are preferable because teens are less likely to re-offend and save potentially millions in taxpayer money.

"We are unable to find any data that shows arresting youth for common youth misbehavior instead of issuing civil citations is a good idea," Dewey Caruthers, the study's author told the Miami Herald. The report was sponsored by The Children's Campaign and several other state and national advocacy groups.

Child support groups in recent years have proposed in the Legislature this year to tion programs in Florida. A measure ers died in a House committee.

But while Miami-Dade is issuing the juvenile civil citations, other counties and jurisdictions are not, That's a shame.

In 2014-2015, statewide there were 11,872 juveniles arrested for "common youth misbehavior," compared to 8,961 who were issued civil citations.

The study recommends nearly doubling the use of juvenile civil citations — to 75 percent statewide by December 2017. We would favor tripling that figure.

The study estimates that doing so would save law enforcement agencies up to \$62.4 million, money that could then be re-invested in other crime prevention programs. Among the worst counties for arresting teens are Hillsborough, Duval and Orange, the study said.



In the same period, the three counties made up 24 percent of all arrests — totaling 2,860 juveniles in Florida — for common youth misbehavior, the Herald reported. Those three counties make up 18 percent of the state's population.

Meanwhile, Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties — which represent 30 percent of the state's population — altogether represented only 9 percent of citation-eligible juvenile arrests in the same time, the study said. There is no reason why the rest of the state should not follow South Florida's lead in this more humane manner of dealing with juvenile offenders.



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