

Houston Chronicle: OPINION

Let's stop trying to fix state-run secure juvenile facilities

By Deborah Fowler and Kathryn Lewis

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Recent revelations by the [Texas Tribune](#) and The [New York Times](#) of ongoing safety concerns in Texas' juvenile justice system only confirm what the leading national research shows: Secure juvenile facilities are a taxpayers burden, work against rehabilitation and can make youths' problems worse.

This latest piece of bad news should not scare us into more attempts to reform a model that can't be reformed. It should instead propel us forward, toward a system that makes the best use of state resources, giving our youth a true opportunity for rehabilitation and a real chance at a productive life.

Data obtained by the Tribune revealed that the rate of youth-on-youth and youth-on-staff assaults has risen over the last 10 years, even in the face of efforts to reform these facilities. For both the perpetrators and the victims, this grinding cycle of violence is completely counterproductive and makes rehabilitation impossible.

Parents frequently call Texas Applesed to describe how their child is being bullied or targeted by other youths in these facilities, parents who are panicked by their inability to protect their son or daughter from the problems exposed by the recent article. Many report that their child has no option but to ask to be moved to a security wing in the facility, forgoing school and important treatment for a chance to feel safe.

The [Texas Juvenile Justice Department](#)'s own data shows that, on 400 separate occasions last year, youth made this request, some of them staying days, weeks or even months in virtual isolation, delaying their progress toward release. This mind-boggling number equates to nearly a third of the average daily population for these facilities in 2011.

Insufficient programming, inadequate staff training, and lack of follow-through is failing too many youths whose untreated aggression behind bars can lead to additional charges that keep them in this dysfunctional system longer, or worse, results in new charges in the adult system. And for taxpayers who hope these youth will come home rehabilitated, the discouraging results come with a big price tag, both in terms of community safety and wasted dollars.

Let's be clear, though, this data is not indicative of failed reform, but rather a failed and outmoded model for juvenile corrections.

Programs proven most effective in rehabilitating our youth keep them in the community, close to home and family - and these programs work at a fraction of what it costs to lock youths away in remote, state-run facilities. Attempts to reform expensive lock-down facilities located in remote areas have rarely worked. California and New York recently announced that they would eliminate their state-run facilities after years of wasted attempts at reform.

Fortunately, Texas is ahead of many other states. Last session, state Sen. [John Whitmire](#), D-Houston, and state Rep. [Jerry Madden](#), R-Plano, led our Legislature in passing Senate Bill 653, a visionary piece of legislation that prioritizes community-based programs over the use of secure facilities. It gives Texas the opportunity to restructure its system by shutting down failed lockups, moving youth back home and shifting the savings to the communities where the youth can get the treatment and rehabilitation that has proven most effective.

All that remains is for Texas to have the courage of its convictions and create a time line for divesting itself of more remote youth lockups. Sometimes being a leader means that we must stop trying to fix what is hopelessly broken.

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